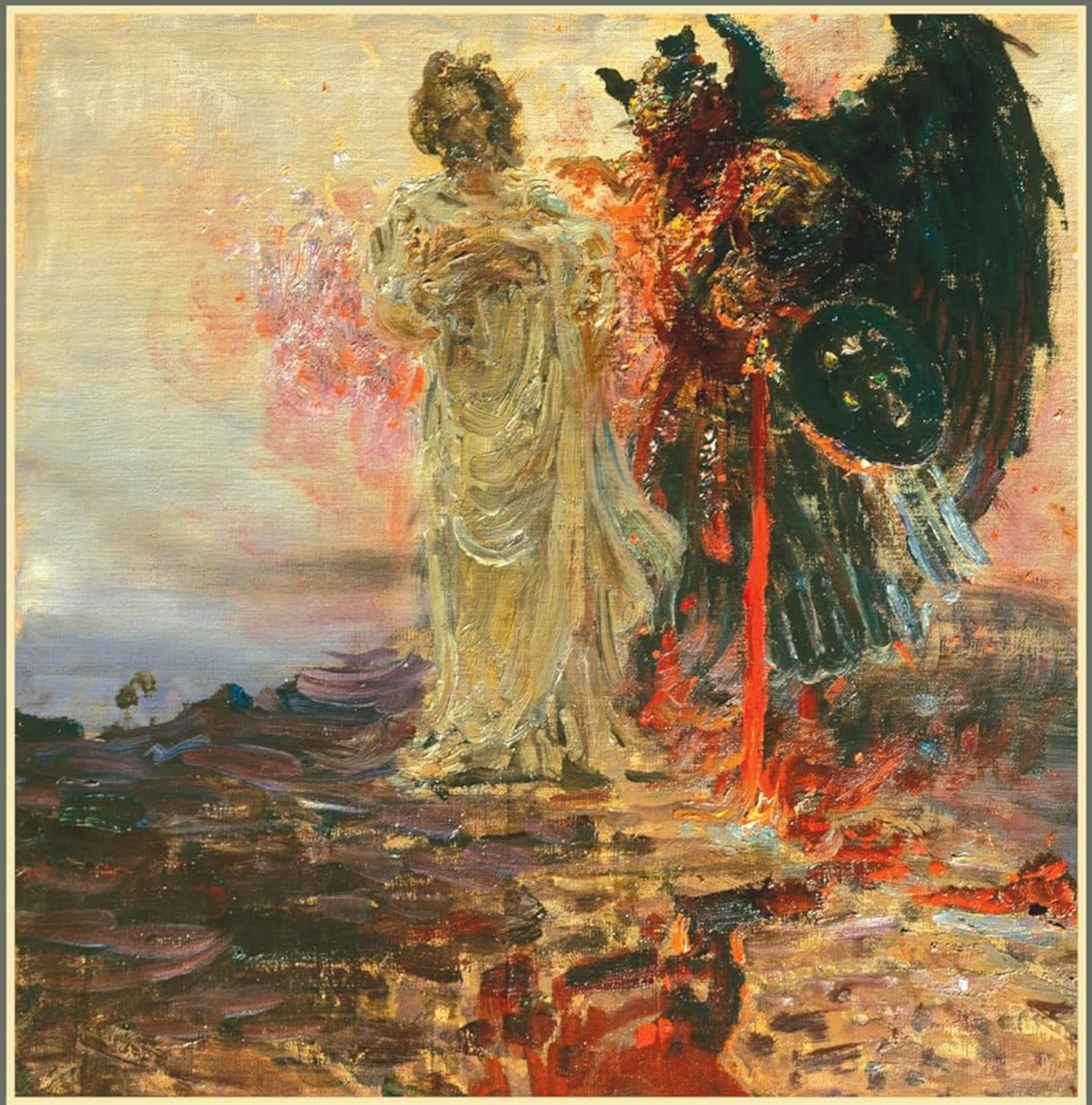

Catholic Horror and Rhetorical Dialectics

Gavin F. Hurley

Catholic Horror and Rhetorical Dialectics

Critical Conversations in Horror Studies

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Preface

"Why horror?" This is the most common question people ask me about my research interests. They are often sincere. Yet, I feel that they really want to ask, "Why are you interested in such a bristling, uncomfortable, and violent genre of storytelling?" To me, their confusion is confusing. After all, horror—specifically supernatural horror—directs our imaginations toward deeper metaphysical realities in new and exciting ways. And this type of thinking is valuable.

The question "Why horror?" probably also confuses me because I grew up in New Jersey, where horror films and literature were commonplace. I also grew up in the 1980s and early 1990s, a time when horror film franchises and mass-market horror paperbacks pervaded popular culture. New Jersey cultivated numerous horror writers such as Jack Ketchum, F. Paul Wilson, Richard Matheson, and Joyce Carol Oates (yes, she wrote horror stories), as well as horror filmmakers like Joe Dante, Brian De Palma, Debra Hill, and others.

Furthermore, New Jersey inherits a culture of horror fiction. I grew up sharing myths about the Jersey Devil, a demon said to lurk in the dark forests of the South Jersey Pine Barrens. My friends and I also imagined pirate ghosts who, once again, are said to lurk in these same dark forests. The "Amityville Horror" demonic possession occurred only 130 miles from my Pine Barrens hometown, up the Garden State Parkway and I-95. And *The Amityville Horror*'s iconic house set was filmed in Toms River, New Jersey, which is only twenty miles north of where I lived. Sean Cunningham's 1980 *Friday the 13th* also has ties to New Jersey; it was filmed in the Kittatinny Mountains located in the northwest region of the state. And there are more geographical connections worth noting: The town of Haddonfield from John Carpenter and Debra Hill's 1978 film *Halloween* was based on Haddonfield in West Jersey. The town of Sleepy Hollow sits just over the Tappan Zee Bridge in New York state. Lovecraftian New England is just north of that. And Stephen King's Maine is just north of *that*. In short, as a child who lived in New Jersey,

these horrors were all too close for comfort. Needless to say, my imagination ran wild.

My interest in horror was further stoked by my visits to video rental stores in the late 1980s/early 1990s when I was a kid. My small South Jersey town, Manahawkin, offered a VHS rental store named A-to-Z Video. It stood at the edge of a strip mall on Route 72: two stores down from the Caldor department store and many stores down from ShopRite supermarket. On Fridays in the early evening, I would enter the store with my parents and brother. While they would gravitate to the wall of new releases on the right, I would peel off to the left, shuffling past the kiddie films to the horror section. There, I would stare in awe at the wall of VHS covers of R-rated teenage slasher tales and supernatural yarns of the macabre. Naturally, I was never allowed to rent horror films as a child, and I accepted that reasonable reality. So, I did the next best thing: I'd look at all the scandalous screenshots on the backs of the film covers. I'd pick up the husks of empty video cases and stare at the thumbnail screengrabs. I was captivated by scenes from films like *Return of the Living Dead*, *Re-Animator*, *Ghoulies*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street 3*.

The transgressive content of horror films captured my attention and sparked my imagination in new ways. And that's what horror—mainly supernatural horror—does for audiences. When I eventually watched horror films as a teenager, the power of a shocking narrative moved me toward the fantastic, that is, toward the imaginative realms outside of human experience; unlike fantasy, however, horror was charged with urgency, danger, and dread. When watching horror films, I felt the expected rushes of adrenaline like all viewers. But those feelings also sparked me to reflect on deeper questions about human existence and the universe. Horror helped me develop as a contemplative person. It helped me understand that the cosmos involves more than the material appearances that are accessible to our limited sensory faculties.

* * *

The second most common question asked about my research is "Why religious and spiritual horror?" Sometimes people raise this question explicitly; other times I can read it on their faces, and I address it before they even ask.

People sometimes think that religious believers thoughtlessly acquiesce to the faith that they are raised in. I did not. I was born and raised as an Episcopalian, and I listlessly drifted into nondenominational Christian spirituality after college. However, I officially converted to Catholicism in my early thirties after attending Saint Joseph's University, a Jesuit Catholic school, where I majored in philosophy and minored in literature and theology. My undergraduate studies introduced me to the philosophical works of Aquinas, Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, Boethius, Plato, and Aristotle, as

well as the mystical traditions of Teresa of Avila, Catherine of Sienna, and *The Cloud of Unknowing.* After encountering these writers and texts, it took several years for my heart to catch up with my head. After a decade of reading and researching the Catholic intellectual and mystical traditions throughout my BA, MA, and PhD work, the arguments became too compelling—and my spiritual experiences became too convincing. It was then when I converted to Catholicism. And I am not alone. Many Catholic authors and thinkers were also converts, such as Graham Greene, G. K. Chesterton, Charles Baudelaire, and even Ernest Hemingway. Other important writers considered converting, such as Edith Wharton and Simone Weil.

Ultimately, I recognize that supernatural horror helped me develop as a contemplative Catholic. And surely, it would have helped me grow if I had been a member of other religious traditions as well. For instance, after being introduced to the representation of spiritual combat via *The Exorcist* film as a twelve-year-old, I read the novel eighteen years later. As an adult, I found Blatty's intellectual insights even more compelling—the horror was both fictional and real to me. This dual sensibility, generated by a powerful work of fiction, helped move my heart and instruct my head toward religious commitment.

To me, Catholicism finds an ally in horror storytelling. By better understanding the nature of misguided evil, people can better understand how to guide their pursuit of piety. In an important way, supernatural horror humbles readers and viewers. And, as this book argues, the dialectical method is at the foundation of this humility. This form of narrative machinery is quite intricate, and it can therefore be easily misunderstood. Popular audiences sometimes overlook the complexity of Catholic horror stories by, for example, conflating American Protestantism with Roman Catholicism, over-politicizing story elements, or missing a work's crucial spiritual or intellectual dimensions. But Catholic horror literature deserves recognition as a complex genre, for it illuminates how the religion embraces mystery and inquiry (vertical *agnosis*) rather than worldly closure and material certainty (horizontal *gnosis*). This connection is what makes the tradition of Catholicism cooperate so well with supernatural horror storytelling.

By exploring the communicated *agnosis* found in Catholic horror literature, I focus on three intersecting paths in this book. Specifically, my readings of Catholic horror texts overlap literary analysis with rhetoric and dialectics, showing how the literary arts inform (and are informed by) the communication arts and the arts of thinking. I find that this classical liberal arts methodology offers the most appropriate way to analyze Catholic horror fiction. As I hope becomes clear via this trifold approach, Catholic horror opens up

dialogue among audiences of all faiths rather than closing it down. Ideally, this book will also spark dialogue about Catholic horror fiction, graciously welcoming readers into new critical conversations about horror studies.

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Introduction

Contemplative Horror and Rhetoric

Upon tracing the literary history, it becomes clear that modern horror fiction emerged from intellectually rich origins. Still, much horror storytelling can be overlooked—perhaps even waved away as genre fiction—especially in academic arenas. Although Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Telltale Heart," and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* may be taught in various college English classrooms, other horror literature can go unnoticed, such as the ghost stories of M. R. James, Edith Wharton, or E. F. Benson—or the cosmic horror tales of H. P. Lovecraft or William Hope Hodgson. Scholars can also overlook the literary merit of more recent horror fiction, such as Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby*, Peter Straub's *Ghost Story*, or William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*. Such overall neglect may suggest a lack of intellectual substance in these novels. However, this message could not be further from the truth.

This book sees horror fiction as an intellectually complex genre. Specifically, it focuses on Catholic horror literature, which provides a type of thoughtful storytelling that differs from secular horror tales, traditional ghost stories, and even cosmic horror fiction. Not a new literary approach, Catholic horror literature offers a niche subgenre that stretches back to the nineteenth century, and even to the Middle Ages with Dante's *Inferno*, the first third of his *Divine Comedy*. This book fleshes out Catholic horror's distinctive features by specifically analyzing the rhetorical dialectics that operate within four Catholic horror novels from across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Similar to the aims of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the four novels' rhetorical attentiveness corrals wider audiences into philosophical and theological lines of reasoning. As I shall show, these lines of reasoning differ from social, political, and cultural inquiries that are commonly investigated in much contemporary horror literature scholarship. This difference derives from the fact

that Roman Catholicism is a philosophical and theological tradition that not only prioritizes the contemplative but also investigates how both faith in the supernatural and natural reason inform the present. Although the Catholic approach to horror literature can certainly overlap with other faith traditions, I argue that it distinctively relies on the classical dialectical process, a method of reasoning influenced by ancient Platonism and medieval Scholasticism that continues still to this day.

Naturally, because dialectics has such a long history, Catholic horror literature is not the only literature that engages with dialectical reasoning.[1] Since the dialectical approach is found throughout all types of literature and film, it can be—and should be—traced in other horror artifacts that are not Catholic to recognize how dialectics play a crucial role in thoughtful horror narratives. Therefore, this book seeks to shed light more generally on rhetorical dialectics to open up future analyses of other thoughtful horror literature and film.[2]

Before embarking on an analysis of Catholic horror literature, it is important to consider how horror literature intersects with contemplative thoughtfulness. While horror literature can certainly comment on social and cultural conditions, it can also pursue transcendent aims, such as ineffability, nonknowledge, and mystical planes of being. It can help audiences contemplate philosophical values—and in the specific case of Catholic horror—contemplate *theological* values. Contemplation offers a complex term, referring to a practice and intellectual tradition that is fueled by a grand sense of wonder. It involves deeply thinking about ideas, essence, the tapestry of the cosmos, and, as Trappist monk Thomas Merton explains, the human "I am" in connection with God's "I Am."[3] Contemplation can be understood as vertically minded.[4] Academic studies of contemplation take place in philosophy departments, schools of theology, and other disciplinary domains that are removed from more horizontal-minded fields in the social sciences and practical professions. This difference demonstrates how contemplation—understood as a mental model—diverges from common humanistic perspectives that inform everyday culture. In other words, contemplation is distinctive as a practice that allows the penetration of the inner self by the outer reality; it prioritizes wider cosmological and ontological perspectives over practical concerns affecting human society.

Contemplation has been a less prominent focus with the advent of modernity, as Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor's monumental work, *A Secular Age*, argues. Taylor traces the origins and eventual dominance of what he calls "exclusive humanism," a perspective alien to the contemplative tradition whereby individuals believe that all meaning is exclusively constructed within their own minds; this attitude leads people to think meaning is defined through their own responses to such self-created purposes.[5] As "bounded" individuals, they see the division between external reality and internal reality

as a buffer, which creates the illusory idea that the self is protected from the *kosmos* by means of individual self-creation.[6] As a result, they foreground their agency as masters who determine the existential meaning of things for themselves.[7] Taylor explains that this "buffered self" is fueled by a form of ambition. The individual strives to disengage from the unknown realm beyond the buffer in an attempt to wield autonomy and impose a sense of order on his or her life. To this end, individuals maintain a fantasy of self-control and self-direction to insulate themselves from the powerlessness and vulnerability that defines human existence.[8] However, in requiring individuals to deny ontological realities and continuously self-invent their existence, this attitude ultimately obstructs peaceability and expansive understandings of love.

Premodern civilization in the West—that is, the Classical, Medieval, and Early Modern eras—were less inclined to see the world in a buffered manner. Taylor suggests that this earlier perspective recognized an enchanted world where external reality guided understandings of truth, goodness, and beauty. Holding this view, premodern people were less inclined to impose subjective meaning on reality; they looked for meaning in things or "intra-cosmic subjects" rather than only in minds.[9] Again, Taylor refers to this more receptive attitude as the "porous self," a form of subjectivity that extends beyond the individual and allows for receptivity of outside power.[10] As Taylor and others maintain,[11] Christianity was a central means of fostering the porous self because it was incited by—and incited in others—contemplative priorities that consider the eternal, not merely the finite. While Taylor's vision of an enchanted premodern world is certainly more complicated given historical developments in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, his view of the porous self is important for this study. It illustrates a fundamental attitude of Roman Catholicism that pervades Catholic horror fiction, one that may challenge popular attitudes of self-inventive individualism. Therefore, in its own way, Catholic horror literature can be seen as counter cultural within the contemporary post-Christian world—and, as such, it opens up rich opportunities for dialogue.

While Taylor locates the idea of the porous self in premodern culture, this mode of subjectivity also works as a potential model for people in the present. The porous self presents opportunities for arriving at a peaceable attitude and worldview that aspires to unity of knowledge and objectivity, understood as the pursuit of truth about Being.[12] Modern iterations of this pursuit can still be found in enduring Western and Eastern spiritual traditions, with their respective literary arts and ongoing forms of cultural production.

As a particular type of these literary arts, Catholic horror fiction is uniquely positioned to move readers—both those who are Catholic and those who are not—toward porous attitudes that align with more contemplative ways of being. Because these texts instruct, motivate, and delight readers via

their dialectical components—that is, their distinctive methods of seeking to resolve opposites—Catholic horror fiction can reorient readers' perspectives by foregrounding the place of human beings within the wider cosmos. These texts can encourage contemplation of existential questions through philosophical and theological mental models that highlight the universality of Being.[13] Catholic horror fiction engages the head and heart, discouraging the readerly temptation to fall back on buffered sentiments. This literature can encourage readers to humbly confront what they do not know and cannot fully know; through this confrontation, Catholic horror texts ideally lead all readers into an experience of humility where they come to acknowledge their role as vulnerable, created beings both in the universe and before one another.

PLURALISM

In exploring the rhetorical and contemplative possibilities of Catholic horror, it is important to acknowledge that this book is not primarily focused on the institutional church, a body whose moral commitments, theological doctrines, and networks of power have been subject to sharp critique—past and present. In foregrounding the dialectical method of thinking within Catholicism, the forthcoming analysis considers how Catholic horror literature rhetorically communicates its beliefs and attitudes to wider audiences from any faith tradition or no faith tradition at all. Approaching Catholic horror literature as a complex rhetorical apparatus, I seek to explore how the genre is uniquely equipped to provide insights into rhetorical discourse itself.

Defined by a focus on rhetorical dialectics, this investigation into Catholic horror literature is also grounded in an underlying assumption of pluralism, a respectful consensus seeking (but not necessarily consensus *finding*) attitude that fuels productive civil discourse. As Eugene Garver explains in his essay "Pluralism and the Virtues of Philosophy," pluralism orchestrates a "deeper response to diversity" that "comes from autonomous practices that are their own end, not instrumental to and measurable by some common external end."[14] As such, Garver posits that groups can regard "diverse modes of rationality as each relatively adequate and self-sufficient."[15] For communication to unfold, pluralism demands a need to understand and embrace "plural interpretations of rationality."[16] Different groups and peoples offer their own intelligibilities, and by seeking to understand these, greater society can facilitate effective communication between such groups—communication empowered by responsible use of the rhetorical arts. Garver emphasizes the importance of autonomy within pluralism, which means that participants "fully internalize pluralism" rather than "finding it in external relations only."[17] By internalizing these attitudes, engaged interlocutors can acknowledge their diverse

perspectives while also leveraging them to pursue common goals, rather than simply stressing ideological incompatibilities.

Catholic horror literature encourages such models of dialogue in its reliance on *foundationalism* rather than *fundamentalism*. According to rhetorician Sharon Crowley, foundational belief systems hold ideologically noncontingent "first principles" as universal and noncontextual.[18] Since all religious belief systems depend on a variation of first principles in some way—such as creator deities or unmoved movers—religious belief systems share a type of foundationalism; however, as Crowley argues, most of these belief systems have a natural tendency to shift into fundamentalisms as those who practice their religion come to value the rationalism of their tradition over other spiritual, religious, or irreligious alternatives.[19] As Crowley explains, fundamentalism "delineates a particular strategy (and tone)" that is based on "a desire to preserve one's own founding beliefs from threat at any cost."[20] To be sure, the cooperation between foundationalism and fundamentalism is intrinsic to any religious tradition. But Catholic horror literature is uniquely positioned to highlight the foundational perspective as a genre that emphasizes differences between existence and essence, the mundane and the transmundane, and chaos and harmony. Catholic horror literature does not often dwell on fundamentalist concerns aimed at scholars of theology. Rather, the texts are written for popular audiences. Their foundational orientation facilitates conversation and engagement across different traditions by spotlighting dialectical mental models and habits of mind. As such, it helps readers internalize pluralism rather than encouraging them to find it in external relations only.

A crucial foundationalist principle of Catholicism that kindles internalized pluralism is the pursuit of objective knowledge through faith and reason. As a way of pursuing this goal, contemplation seeks a form of knowledge that transcends the limits of rationality; it hungers "to know *beyond* all knowing or unknowing," as Merton explains.[21] To be sure, this contemplative perspective is not exclusive to Catholicism but, instead, extends to other Christian denominations, Eastern religions, and secular philosophies.[22] Contemplation can be approached through a pluralist perspective not only because it is relevant to varied religious traditions but also because it pursues an essential mode of knowing or truth that looks beyond the trappings of worldly investments and things. As Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar explains in *Truth Is Symphonic*, truth seeking is a revelatory or visionary endeavor, one that extends beyond typical disciplinary knowing. The contemplative orientation is inherently pluralistic because it assumes and proceeds from the "intrinsic limitations and incompetence" of specialized pursuits of knowledge.[23] It is a quest for revelation that "uncovers" the "incomplete character of philosophies and worldviews."[24] Balthasar therefore ultimately suggests that "revelation has no choice but to . . . dismantle the philosophies until it

uncovers the genuine search common to them all."[25] While the search for truth is communicated and pluralistically deliberated across various traditions, different approaches are united by the contemplative's "restless heart," which motivates the search for truth.[26] He explains, "Whatever is in touch with itself at its origin cannot fail to know itself in the pluralism of perspectives and missions that spring from that origin."[27] Different perspectives can "meet and communicate" at this origin or root level[28]—and this contemplative common ground unites the symphonic nature of truth.

The pluralism at the heart of the contemplative mode aligns with the more accessible rhetorical approach of Catholic horror literature, which can be understood as what rhetorician Richard McKeon calls a "creative commonplace." This term refers to a "commonplace of commonplaces"—that is, an arena allowing uncertainty to be openly negotiated within a dwelling space where order and organization unfold. McKeon's commonplace of commonplaces enables a version or iteration of pluralism fueled by invention.[29] This framework moves away from reliance upon traditional commonplaces—that is, the familiar points of comfortable repetition that depend upon hindsight.[30] Familiar and traditional references occupy a place within a creative "commonplace of commonplaces"; however, these points of reference become the materials of fresh innovation. The creative process unites memory and invention to solve problems while not relying completely on fundamentalism. *Referencing* fundamentalism, rather than *relying* on fundamentalism, can open up the inclusivity of the discourse: all audiences can participate and move the discussion forward.[31] It leads to "the establishment of the new in existence, experience, discursive exploration, and inclusive organization."[32] Catholic horror literature acts as a delegate in this discursive public space rather than hiding itself beyond institutional walls.

All four of the Catholic horror novels explored in this book generally act as creative commonplaces that highlight foundationalism rather than fundamentalism. The inclusiveness of the approach is evidenced by each book's successful reception by the public. After all, each of the four Catholic horror novels analyzed in this study sold relatively well to a range of readerships within their historical moments.[33]

CONTEMPLATIVE HORROR

Catholic horror literature offers a type of contemplative fiction that cultivates the "porous self." Since such contemplation insists on meaningful—but elaborate—metaphysical principles, the rhetorical artistry must ensure that it does not neglect its readers. In other words, particularly effective contemplative horror does not act solely as "art for art's sake"; nor does it offer dense

philosophical treatises. Rather, effective contemplative horror delicately balances both art and philosophy within a narrative vehicle of persuasion. As an effective rhetoric, contemplative horror does not persuade audiences *what* to think in a clumsy propagandized manner; rather, it guides audiences in *how* to think—specifically, *how* to think *philosophically, theologically, or spiritually*. Ultimately, contemplative horror fiction—especially Catholic horror—uses the complexions of dialectics in imaginative frameworks to communicate mystical outlooks, presenting philosophical and theological perspectives that extend beyond the contingencies of everyday concerns and experiences.

The modern term "thinking horror" (sometimes known as "elevated horror") can be naturally defined as horror that elevates audiences' aesthetic sensibilities by fusing the genre with character-based drama.[34] While thinking horror can entertain, it also pursues more cerebral aims by provoking audiences to reflect on the world, contemplate the logic of ideas, or ruminate on both of these domains. As the Platonist tradition suggests, individuals generally can be prompted into two types of thinking: one focused on earthly matters, the other focused on philosophical contemplation.[35] These modes of thought examine reality in different ways, and the distinctions between each are illustrative for teasing out the range of approaches within the broader category of "thinking horror."

While works of horror often function as a form of cultural critique, this book takes a unique approach to the social dimensions of the genre. In *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King defines social horror as a mode that addresses "serious social subjects." Featuring "a logical or satirical extrapolation of current social trends," such works "become science fiction," and they ultimately "walk the borderline between horror and social satire."[36] While this book focuses on the contemplative orientation of Catholic horror fiction, it is important to acknowledge that the socially engaged mode of horror often looks toward *applied* philosophical concepts such as justice and caretaking. However, these works generally do not interrogate the immaterial essence of such concepts—that is, what Catholic thinker Russell Kirk calls the "permanent things."[37] In social horror, material problem solving takes priority over ontological concerns or explorations of metaphysical wonder.

Still, Catholicism can be seen in terms of this social orientation given its historical commitment to social justice. This strain of Catholic thought is evident in a range of papal encyclicals, for example.[38] But even still, the focus on social justice within Catholicism has a philosophical perspective, one that seeks to refine and communicate the metaphysics informing this ethical orientation and its practical manifestations in the world.[39] When Catholic horror fiction pursues universal principles and concepts such as truth, goodness, and beauty, these topics are relevant to the goal of rooting out social and cultural

injustices. But the Catholic social justice movement takes a unique approach to worldly ills, for its criteria of ethical judgment derives from premodern principles such as Aristotelian virtue ethics, rather than modern pragmaticism.

But what of supernatural horror fiction within the tradition of Catholicism? This mode of horror may seem to have less value in that it lacks the clear pragmatic goals of socially oriented horror. Critics may interpret supernatural horror as a mode that merely aims to dazzle audiences with fantastic schemes. Supernatural horror may thus appear to deliberately ignore injustices in the real world in favor of promoting entertainment and escapism. Moreover, the fantastic elements within supernatural horror may give the impression that this form of the art endorses or requires the suspension of rationality. As a result, when audiences read supernatural horror tales like Clive Barker's *The Hellbound Heart* or William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist*, they may find the depictions of extreme situations to be fanciful, self-referential, and unrelated to the real world. Such interpretations might well be reinforced by the novels' portrayal of demonic creatures, who seem otherworldly and unrealistic. Accordingly, readers may assume that such stories do not offer any serious takeaways.

Yet, these impressions can be hasty, for they may proceed from the fallacious assumption that only socially oriented horror provokes thought about serious issues. But contemplative supernatural horror within the Catholic tradition does not ignore reality. Instead, it ponders a broader sense of reality through philosophical, theological, or mystical representations. Because its narrative modes are less literal and empirically focused, supernatural contemplative horror explores ideas and cognitive attitudes in themselves, rather than material conditions outside of the literature.

While Catholic contemplative horror literature rhetorically emphasizes immaterial orientation, the literature also communicates how immateriality cooperates with the material world. These two orientations are classically distinguished as the *vita contemplativa* (contemplative life) and the *vita activa* (active life). Thomas Aquinas discusses this relationship in the *Summa Theologica*, determining that the contemplative (or vertical) life is a more strenuous and therefore more virtuous pursuit than the active (horizontal) life.[40] However, he does not see these forms of life in opposition to each other, for the active life precedes the contemplative life and "disposes one to" commit to this higher way of being (II-II, q. 182, a.4) (II-II, q. 182, a.3).[41] Therefore, although Catholic horror fiction may not overtly emphasize the active life as much as other forms of fiction, in the Catholic tradition, the spiritual and mystical emphases inform a virtuous active life in the world.

Such influence can stem from two different types of contemplation, which again cooperate with one another within Catholic horror literature. The classical liberal arts tradition dissects the *vita contemplativa* into two parts: *ratio*

and *intellectus*. According to Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper, the *ratio* is the "distinctly human [. . .] power of discursive, logical thought, of searching and of examination, of abstraction, of definition and drawing conclusions."[42] The *ratio* is a more active contemplative engagement with the arguments that pervade the characters, dialogue, and plot of a story. *Intellectus* is defined as "*simplex inuitus*"—that is, a "simple vision to which truth offers itself like a landscape to the eye." As such, it is "already beyond the sphere allotted to man."[43] To this end, contemplation as *intellectus* does not completely rely on active mental labor but, instead, requires passive receptivity; in fact, it can even be associated to a type of "play" as interpreted by Thomas Aquinas.[44] It offers a way to read literature by fully engaging the porous self.

Catholic horror fiction appropriately guides readers into both rationality-driven *vita contemplativa* (*ratio*) and mystical *vita contemplativa* (*intellectus*). While *intellectus* contemplation can be seen as the most leisurely of the two distinctions, contemplative horror literature most clearly nourishes *ratio.* This investment becomes evident when, for example, characters reason together in dialectical conversation about the role of faith or the nature of supernatural evil. Yet, frequently in contemplative horror fiction, and especially in Catholic horror novels, dialogues end without logical answers—that is, they end in *aporia*—despite engagement of the *ratio*. This open-endedness acknowledges the limits of rational thinking. It invites readers into a space for passive *intellectus*. Since *intellectus* involves the mystical and ineffable, it is difficult to literally depict this contemplative state in fiction. Still, such difficulty does not deter dark fantasy / horror / weird fiction writers from rhetorically stoking the *intellectus*. This nod to the *intellectus* appears in a variety of horror / dark fiction outside and inside the Catholic tradition. It is evident in "The Red Tower" (1996), a short story by contemporary atheist writer Thomas Ligotti, and *The House on the Borderland* (1908), a mystical novel by Anglican-influenced writer William Hope Hodgson. It is also evident in the dark fantastic novel *The Man Who Was Thursday: A Nightmare* (1908) by Catholic writer G. K. Chesterton and the ghost stories of Catholic writer Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson.

OPTIMISTIC AND PESSIMISTIC CONTEMPLATION

Catholic horror's literary depictions and rhetorical incitation of the *vita contemplativa*, whether of the *ratio* or *intellectus* varieties, point toward *Logos*: divine order and purpose unfolding from perpetual love. Such optimism differs from pessimist *vita contemplativa* perspectives that may represent a cosmic void of purposeless and otherness.[45] While I will be looking at

both *ratio* and *intellectus*, the focus remains on the optimistic *vita contemplativa*. As outlined by Brad Baumgartner in his 2020 book *Weird Mysticism*, cosmic pessimism has been explored by various thinkers, including Eugene Thacker, Thomas Ligotti, E. M. Cioran, and lapsed Catholic Georges Bataille.[46] While pessimism and optimism can both appear in the dialectics of Catholic horror literature, the stories ultimately lean toward optimistic contemplation; to that end, pessimistic elements are used to contrast and thus reveal what is ultimately good. Catholic guidance highlights the deficiencies of a pessimistic *vita contemplativa*—that focus, for example, on attitudes that may be found in nihilism, Satanism, and the occult. The more optimistically spiritual *vita contemplativa* emphasizes *Logos* over and against anti-*Logos*. It privileges dialogue (note that the word "dialogue" purposes the Greek "*logos*" in its etymology) between both as a means to better understand the True and the Good. It also seeks knowledge over and against nonknowledge. In contrast, pessimistic contemplation, understood as an atheistic endeavor, strives to dwell beyond *Logos* and outside of the conception of God. This counter-position reaches beyond knowledge-building dialectics. In *Starry Speculative Corpse*, philosopher Eugene Thacker traces levels of "darkness" found within this type of dark mysticism.[47] He explains that the darkest darkness refuses the structure of dialectics.[48] Some writers are fascinated by the darkness that resists the dialectical model, as in pessimistic horror literature by H. P. Lovecraft and, more recently, Thomas Ligotti. In their tales, the dark void of nonknowablity creates an *aporia* that aggressively communicates futility and despair by erasing possibilities of *Logos* and divine love. After all, as Thacker explains, this ultimate darkness simply expresses that "There is nothing," and the nothing "cannot be known."[49]

Rhetoricians Joseph Packer and Ethan Stoneman suggest that supernatural horror lends itself to such pessimism through the dark aesthetics that characterize the horror genre. In this reading, supernatural horror ultimately obscures predetermined paths to make sense of the world and undercuts metanarratives such as Christianity.[50] To this end, these stories deploy the "strange" to enact "an effective hostility against the world, against life, and against meaning."[51] Of course, Stoneman and Packer clarify that they do not advocate cosmic pessimism; still, they recognize it as a powerful rhetoric.[52] They suggest such pessimism "subverts and upends optimistic structures and tropes, rather than existing independently from them."[53]

While some modes of horror negate optimistic metanarratives, the dialectic structure of Catholic horror ultimately counters cosmic pessimism. Such pessimism entails emotions like fear, despair, and repulsion—which are affective movements that the supernatural horror genre often seeks to encourage, as Stoneman and Packer rightly point out. However, Catholic horror acts as

a type of counter-pessimism, for it subverts the pessimism that is contingent on subverting optimism. While pessimism overturns an initial sense of optimism, the optimism that ultimately emerges from the dialectics of Catholic horror provides a third volley: it reacts by overturning this pessimistic overturning. Either directly or indirectly, Catholic horror literature undermines the denial of divine love by directing audiences' attention back to a consideration of divine love. It prompts this perspectival shift in a way that evokes supernatural mystery; the texts thus offer benevolent sites of humility.

As this book will show, Catholic horror's engagement with pessimism can serve optimistic ends. If done thoughtfully, such engagement can acknowledge mystical complexity without resorting to happy endings and naïve narrative closure. The Catholic dialectics of contemplative horror bring pessimism and optimism together in a way that challenges binary approaches to ethics and horror narratives. This methodology resists formulaic stories about good versus evil where a good side predictably wins. To this end, Catholic horror fiction becomes an arena where cosmic pessimism collides with cosmic optimism, enabling readers to engage in philosophical forms of inquiry and contemplate reality for themselves. The invitation into this conceptual inter-space becomes a primary rhetorical operation within the dialectical matrix of Catholic horror. This genre—as a form of contemplative horror—exemplifies the cooperation between rhetorical and dialectical maneuvers.

CONTEMPLATIVE HORROR FICTION AS RHETORIC

Contemplative horror fiction offers a distinctive rhetoric, a term that refers to any means of purposeful and audience-minded communication. However, what does it mean to house philosophy within a rhetoric? As Plato points out in his *Meno* dialogue, philosophical thinking can be defined as pursuing "the truth of reality" (86b).[54] Philosophy looks to establish principles, concepts, and values that pervade and transcend subjective reality. Rhetoric proves relevant to this enterprise because it serves to communicate these principles, concepts, and values to specific audiences.

As a rhetoric, then, contemplative horror does not convey philosophical dogma. Rather, as a fiction, it immerses audiences in narrative, using stories as a way of conceptualizing reality and exposing audiences to contemplative attitudes. Classic examples of philosophical fiction can be found in the work of Fyodor Dostoyevsky or Albert Camus; Christian theological fiction can be found in the work of C. S. Lewis or G. K. Chesterton. As a broad category that subsumes both philosophical and theological perspectives, contemplative horror places audiences alongside fictional characters, engrossing readers in their truth-seeking missions. As an arena of applied philosophy or theology,

horror fiction pursues truth in imaginative circumstances, drawing readers into participatory narrative environments.

Ideally, rhetorical communication and philosophical truth seeking cooperate within a piece of contemplative horror fiction. Plato, for example, cautions against entertaining rhetoric that does not constitute a fulfilling and ethical form of truth seeking. Instead, rhetoric should be tethered to philosophical inquiry. According to Plato's *Phaedrus*, if the rhetoric only provides pleasure and does not truly educate listeners' souls, then it is "never to be taken too seriously" (277e).[55] He endorses rhetorical style that cooperates with "dialectical truth seeking" (266b–266c).[56]

Contemplative horror pays heed to Socrates's/Plato's caveats against exclusively playful rhetoric by using dialectics to both instruct and move audiences toward truth-seeking or contemplative orientations. Accordingly, Plato would surely not advocate horror fiction that neglects knowledgeable content or inquiry. For example, pulp horror fiction that delivers cheap thrills, jump scares, or adrenaline rushes, and that neglects philosophical inquiry would not align with Plato's ideal rhetoric. It is too playful to deliver any soul-leading truths. In contrast to pulp horror, contemplative horror literature supports Socrates's ideal whenever it pursues truth, seeks to heal souls, and balances its rhetorical duties to instruct, move, and delight audiences.

In short, thinking horror—specifically *contemplative* thinking horror—can offer dialectical narrative conventions that help spark thoughtful discovery processes. They do not declare dogmatic answers to audiences; but rather, like the dialogic approaches found in Plato's work, they immerse readers within processes of pondering truth alongside fictional characters who simultaneously contemplate truth. In this way, the intellectual architecture of contemplative horror introduces audiences to new modes of truth seeking in accessible ways that they may not have previously pondered. Fueled by curiosity, these modes are presented in genuine pursuits to resolve oppositions via conversation—whether in the internal thought process of a protagonist, a debate between two human characters, or a fraught exchange between a human character and a demonic entity.

What specifically drives philosophical and theological curiosity within the horror genre among audiences? Because modern culture is commonly driven by utility and pragmaticism, it may seem that contemplative horror audiences are motivated by absolute certainty—that is, they want answers to life's deep questions so they can immediately apply these to their own individual circumstances. However, absolute certainty about a philosophical issue seems unrealistic given that humans must always confront the limits of epistemology and the constraints of linguistic expression.[57] Along similar lines, readers do not open horror novels in search of scientific proofs. Instead, they seek an invitation to understand; they want to be drawn into the imaginative elements

of a narrative and, through that lens, thoughtfully ponder the physical and metaphysical worlds around them. In other words, fiction can walk audiences through philosophical or theological orientations, rather than confronting readers with proclamations of complete certainty. Catholic horror literature, as rhetoric, can engage such processes of communicating possibilities and probabilities. Catholic horror literature can insulate audiences from hard-edged obsessions with rational certainty that have been inherited from the Enlightenment. As such, horror fiction humanizes the process of philosophical, theological, and mystical discovery in ways that respect the human dignity of readers.

PARADOX OF HORROR

Contemplative horror reaches toward transcendent understanding, which can be both frightening and enjoyable. Horror fiction provides an apt means of balancing the two ends of this spectrum. This balanced spectrum acts as an iteration of Noël Carroll's "paradox of horror," which describes the genre's power both to repulse and to attract audiences.[58] Interestingly, the discomfort found in horror can be a boon that shocks audiences into thinking more deeply. As remarked by Socrates in Plato's *Gorgias*, what feels pleasant does not always signal what is good (497a).[59] Therefore, feeling discomfort by contemplating philosophical uncertainties within scary narratives—that is, a fusion of what Eugene Thacker calls the "horror of philosophy" within a rhetoric and poetics of horror—can be a productive pursuit. The rhetoric, poetics, and dialectic all engage feelings of fright and thereby yank readers away from monotonous habits of cognitive comfort. Such exciting contrast can explain why horror can be so attractive to audiences despite its repulsive elements. Despite feeling uneasy from the horror experience, audiences can also find it exhilarating to contemplate truths on their own. The discovery process can offer audiences "cognitive pleasure"[60] as they engage contemplative faculties of *ratio* and *intellectus*.

As a rhetoric, horror fiction can be interpreted as an attention-grabbing mechanism—and an attention-*sustaining* mechanism. The strangeness of supernatural horror sparks readers' curiosity—and seduces them into reading these stories; then, the fiction's cultivation of wonder keeps them reading these stories. According to contemporary rhetorician Richard Lanham, the arts of rhetoric or "arts of persuasion" can be seen as the oldest studies of the "economics of attention."[61] The classical rhetorical tradition recognizes attention as a scarce commodity—and accommodates it accordingly.[62] Building on this tradition, the rhetoric of fiction becomes a crucial lens through which to

view how the horror genre engages and sustains readers' attention in order to escort them into contemplative mind-sets.

Ultimately, attention-minded pursuits of discovery sit at the middle of Carroll's "paradox of horror." Horror offers a powerful experience that involves a proportioned balance of revulsion and wonder, pleasure and pain, and rationality and adrenaline. In addition, contemplative horror unites a trifold of well-balanced communication that is famously endorsed by ancient rhetoricians including Cicero in *De Optimo Genere Oratorum* (I.3–4) and Augustine in *De Doctrina Christiana* (4.12). According to these rhetoricians, persuasive communication should strive after three simultaneous modes or *officia oratoris* (offices of the orator): to move, instruct, and delight. Contemplative horror literature—of which Catholic horror literature is a subset—can engage all three modes. It can move audiences toward discovery within the fictional experience; it can teach understanding through the fictional experience; and it can provide adrenaline-fueled pleasure (connected to discovery and understanding) within the fictionalized experience. In other words, such literature can inspire readers to want to know more contemplatively, it can teach readers about particular lines of contemplative inquiry, and it can delight audiences by telling an exciting story. These modes extend beyond the horror reading experience as well. After readers finish a piece of horror fiction, they can continue to engage those three habits of mind. Inspired by the horror text, they can continue to desire new avenues of inquiry (or take up other literature/horror literature); they can continue to welcome instruction; and they can recall the pleasure evoked by the fiction (and its according truth-seeking pursuit). In other words, contemplative horror writing primes a reader to know how to wield their intellectual and spiritual curiosity—and to *want* to do so.

Catholic horror literature kindles that curiosity via the three offices of rhetoric in cooperation with dialectics. As an intellectual process and rhetorical architecture of ideas, dialectics align with the horror genre in accommodating both pleasure and discomfort. These positive and negative feelings unfold naturally when one is immersed in dialectical inquiry—specifically, when using dialogic dialectics such as the Socratic Method. As Ward Farnsworth acutely observes, the Socratic Method, as exemplified in Plato's dialogues, offers wisdom that is "always bought at the price" of discomfort.[63] Therefore, through dialectics, the human hunger for wisdom collides with tolerance for discomfort.[64] Both are commonly featured in Catholic dialectical argumentation and Catholic horror literature—and the former can be embedded in the latter. Dialectical argumentation depends on humble discomfort of knowing that one does not know—and this discomfort is compounded by the viscerally unsettling horror narrative itself. Therefore, Catholic contemplative horror

literature is far from naïve and simple. It is gritty and dynamic, and it seldom concludes with tangible closure.

To emphasize the dynamism of this rhetorical and generic mode, this book examines four textual artifacts of Catholic horror. The following chapters trace how Catholic literature relies on classical dialectical processes to strengthen and communicate arguments, engage with opposing positions, and push the limits of human knowing beyond materialism and empiricism. Classical dialectics offers intricate logical processes that inform the method of Catholic thinking; so naturally this rhetorical form pervades Catholic horror fiction. To begin outlining its influence, I first define Catholic horror in respect to the Catholic intellectual tradition. Chapter 1 shows how and why horror fiction serves the communicative needs of that tradition despite its provocative content—and, also, *because* of its provocative content. Chapter 2 explains the features of classical dialectics, outlining how these cooperate with the rhetorical arts of communication. In addition to describing how rhetoric overlaps with dialectics, both rhetoric and dialectics are shown to enhance the function of fiction. Ultimately, the chapter establishes a vocabulary and general architecture of thought that informs the literary works explored in the rest of the book. Chapter 3 examines the first of these works: J. K. Huysmans's 1891 novel *Là-Bas*. As a thinly veiled autobiography of Huysmans, who was a Catholic convert, *Là-Bas* intimately documents a man who struggles to find deeper meaning in cosmopolitan Paris by wrestling with temptations of Satanism and dark mysticism. The chapter analyzes the dialectics unfolding between good and bad mysticisms as well as the dialectics between transcendence and worldliness. Chapter 4 then begins the first of two chapters on the horror literature of Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson, a Catholic writer of supernatural tales in the early 1900s. I first explore the dialectical relationship between supernaturalism and humanism in Benson's 1903 novel *The Light Invisible*. In this novel, an old priest tells supernatural stories to a curious visitor before engaging in his own spiritual warfare while lying on his deathbed. Chapter 5 considers Benson's later work, *A Mirror of Shalott*, which again involves a series of short tales. This time, however, the novel portrays a symposium of Catholic priests telling supernatural stories with more overt Catholic theological overtones than appear in *The Light Invisible*. Accordingly, this chapter addresses how the stories and dialectical processes of the novel engage with formal Catholic theology, specifically the Catholic thinking of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Pope Benedict XVI. Moving to the late twentieth century, chapter 6 examines William Peter Blatty's best-selling 1971 novel *The Exorcist*. Blatty, a Jesuit-educated Catholic writer, was clearly influenced by the Platonic dialectic and Catholic theology. In a reading of the novel, I demonstrate how these layers of dialectics not only correspond to the

Transcendentals (the Good, True, and Beautiful) but also model the general operations of Catholic horror literature that I have laid out here.

Each of the novels I analyze is noteworthy for employing rhetorical dialectics in nuanced ways. On the one hand, these texts display shared interests and similar characteristics in their exploration of topics such as the human flaws of priests, outsiders' impressions of Catholics, and the value of faithful agnosticism. On the other hand, each of these novels also takes a unique approach to dialectics, employing the method to engage readers' philosophical and spiritual curiosity in different ways. While Huysmans, Benson, and Blatty are obviously not the only authors whose works exhibit the features of Catholic horror fiction, they warrant analysis because their novels provide exemplary models of rhetorical dialectics in action. The final chapter of the book discusses the significant overlaps between these four works. It argues that the genre of Catholic horror can be valuable to readers of all faiths and orientations, I contend, because it combines realist concerns with an investment in the supernatural. In other words, Catholic horror proposes that realism is not exclusively materialistic. The architecture of rhetorical dialectics can extend outside the walls of the Catholic institution to help readers expand their heads and hearts, reaching beyond the claustrophobic, "buffered" existence of modern life to develop "porous selves."

Overall, the book seeks to fill in some of the gaps within horror scholarship in respect to Catholic horror fiction. In a balanced manner, effective Catholic horror entertains wide readerships while also getting serious intellectual, rhetorical, and spiritual work done. The book closely examines how that balance is rhetorically achieved. Additionally, the book's emphasis on dialectical frameworks is important since it distinguishes Catholic horror literature from other forms of secular horror—or even other forms of religious horror. Outside of this book, much work still remains to be done on Catholic horror literature, and I have provided an appendix listing other primary texts that lie within this genre. My hope is that this material—and the larger book—will inspire other scholars and critics to conduct more studies of Catholic horror literature, examining this body of writing from various perspectives that go beyond the scope of this project. While Huysmans, Benson, and Blatty are from different countries, the authors I explore in this book are all obviously men. Accordingly, a study is certainly warranted to trace varying degrees of Catholic influence on female supernatural horror writers (Anne Rice, Edith Wharton, and Muriel Spark come immediately to mind). Other studies might consider horror fiction by lapsed Catholic horror writers (such as Guillermo del Toro) or Catholic convert authors (for example, Graham Greene and Russell Kirk). Ultimately, *Catholic Horror and Rhetorical Dialectics* hopes to incite further critical conversations, hence its contribution to this particular book series. These conversations could consider a variety of issues ranging

from the widely applicable operations of rhetorical dialectics in horror literature to the potential benefits or pitfalls of Catholic horror fiction. These conversations can probe important questions: Does horror storytelling productively stretch the intellectual imagination? Does it stretch it too much? And where does *Catholic* horror fiction fall on this spectrum? As the first study of the Catholic horror genre, this book lays important groundwork. Not only does it recognize the rhetorical and spiritual richness of horror literature, but it also invites readers to appreciate the dark radiance of contemplative horror storytelling.

NOTES

1. Dialectical reasoning operates throughout canonical Western literature that is distinctly not horror—from Homer's *Iliad* to Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*—because it formally originated in the pre-Christian era with Plato, Socrates, and the pre-Socratic philosophers/rhetoricians.

2. For a rhetorical analysis of horror literature that is not Catholic, look to my article titled "Clive Barker's Rhetorical Dialectics: Stretching the Intellectual Imagination," *Horror Studies* 13, no. 1 (April 2022): 43–61.

3. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 1961 (New York: New Directions, 1972; originally published in 1961), 13.

4. Vertical-minded contemplation differs from horizontal-minded contemplation. Contemplation can be understood as different than merely "thinking"—and therefore, it is not used in the colloquial sense such as, "Mary contemplated which cereal to purchase in the supermarket."

5. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 38.

6. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38. The Greek version of the word emphasizes the etymology of the word "cosmos." Cosmos can be defined as the orderly and systematic harmony of the universe.

7. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38.

8. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 38–39.

9. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 33.

10. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 36.

11. Such as Paul Tillich, C. S. Lewis, Rudolf Otto, Karl Rahner, and other thinkers. See Robert Barron's essay "Blasting Holes through the Buffered Self," in *Redeeming the Time* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2022), 26–28.

12. The word "university" is etymologically traced to "turning toward the one." Traditionally, the university means to be a place where learning and research points to the unity of knowledge as an end.

13. The idea of literature serving philosophy can be traced back to Aristotle's *Poetics*. In Book IX, he states that poetry/literature is more profound than history because

it expresses universals, rather than only particulars. Catholic horror literature aligns with this perspective.

14. Eugene Garver, "Pluralism and the Virtues of Philosophy," in *Pluralism in Theory and Practice: Richard McKeon and American Philosophy*, ed. Eugene Garver and Richard Buchanan (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2000), 130.

15. Garver, "Pluralism," 131.

16. Garver, "Pluralism," 129.

17. Garver, "Pluralism," 131–32.

18. Sharon Crowley, *Toward a Civil Discourse: Rhetoric and Fundamentalism* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 13.

19. Crowley, *Toward a Civil Discourse*, 13–14.

20. Crowley, *Toward a Civil Discourse*, 14.

21. Merton, *New Seeds*, 1–2.

22. These shared contemplative attitudes are shown throughout Merton's interfaith dialogues with Hindus and Buddhists—most notably the Dalai Lama. Contemplative attitudes can be found within the work of some atheist poststructuralists such as Georges Bataille.

23. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Truth Is Symphonic: Aspects of Christian Pluralism*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1987), 53.

24. Balthasar, *Truth Is Symphonic*, 53.

25. Balthasar, *Truth Is Symphonic*, 54.

26. Balthasar, *Truth Is Symphonic*, 54.

27. Balthasar, *Truth Is Symphonic*, 87.

28. Balthasar, *Truth Is Symphonic*, 87.

29. Richard McKeon, "Creativity and the Commonplace," in *Rhetoric: Essays in Invention and Discovery*, ed. Mark Backman (Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow, 1987), 36.

30. McKeon, "Creativity and the Commonplace," 35.

31. For a similar discussion, see McKeon's "Creativity and the Commonplace," 35–36.

32. McKeon, "Creativity and the Commonplace," 36.

33. While *A Mirror of Shalott* appears to have been favored in Catholic circles (Cyril C. Martindale, *The Life of Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson* [London: Longmans, Green, 1917], 397), *Light Invisible* sold well according to Benson (Robert H. Benson, *Confessions of a Convert* [London: Longmans Green, 1913], 81), received favorable reviews (Janet Grayson, *Robert Hugh Benson: Life and Works* [Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998], 65), and even led to an Anglo-American "cult" following (Grayson, *Robert Hugh Benson: Life and Works*, 67). However, the specific book sales cannot be pinpointed. Similarly, Huysmans scholar Terry Hale explains that, due to *Là-Bas*'s scandalous accounts of Satanism, the novel helped expose the author to wider readerships than he previous enjoyed; it "cemented the author's reputation as a writer at the very forefront of the literary avant-garde" (Introduction to *Là-Bas* [London: Penguin, 2001], viii). The various censored/translated versions of *Là-Bas*, as well as the book burnings of the novel (Hale, Introduction to *Là-Bas*, xxvvii–xxvviii), would complicate the accuracy of book sales numbers. Finally, as a best-selling novel, *The Exorcist* sold more than thirteen million copies

(Paul Vitello, "William Peter Blatty, Author of 'The Exorcist,' Dies at 89," *New York Times*, January 13, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/13/books/william-peter-blatty-author-of-the-exorcist-dies-at-89.html).

34. For more on elevated horror, see David Church's book *Post-horror: Art, Genre, and Elevation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

35. Although this perspective is woven throughout Plato's corpus, it can be most clearly and famously found in Plato's *Allegory of the Cave*, in *The Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 514a–520a.

36. Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Everest House, 1981; repr., New York: Gallery, 2010), 174.

37. Russell Kirk, *Enemies of the Permanent Things* (Providence, RI: Cluny, 2016).

38. Such as Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* ("On the Conditions of Labor," 1891), Pope John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* ("Christianity and Social Progress," 1961), Pope Francis's *Fratelli Tutti* ("On Fraternity and Social Friendship," 2020), and others.

39. Hunter Brown, "Appendix: Philosophy, Religion, and Gratuity in Catholicism," in *Grace and Philosophy: Understanding a Gratuitous World* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019).

40. A counter-perspective to Aquinas is found in Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998), in which she highlights the importance of the *vita activa* as it contributes to the social and political life. Arendt remarks that the reversal toward the *vita activa* signals one of many reversals found throughout the history of Western thought. The *vita activa*/*vita contemplativa* debate offers ongoing reversals and re-reversals. Predating Taylor's observation in 2007 (Taylor, *A Secular Age*) about the buffered self, Arendt suggests that the modern age fostered a reversal toward subjective inwardness; it reversed the premodern viewpoint of the "deceptively perishable" world and otherworldly eternals. However, she notes modernity's understanding of "thinking" replaces contemplation as an active state or type of "doing." Therefore, contemplation has been replaced by the *vita activa*. Decades later, poststructural philosophers such as Richard Rorty celebrate this attitude. In his "Intellectual Autobiography," in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, ed. Randall E. Auxier and Lewis Edwin Hahn (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2010), Rorty adamantly proclaims that philosophy should stop pursuing any contemplative focus. According to him, traditional philosophy should cease so philosophers can direct their attention toward "cultural politics" instead. In short, these twentieth-century thinkers, alongside others, focus on the practical fruits of horizontal thinking toward pragmatic ends—and do not favor classical contemplation as an inherently useful endeavor.

41. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948).

42. Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*, trans. Alexander Dru (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2009), 28.

43. Pieper, *Leisure*, 28.

44. Pieper, *Leisure*, 34.

45. This optimism is not incompatible with negative theology, a theological strategy that is not necessarily pessimistic. For example, Thomas Aquinas uses negative theology in his *Summa Theologiae* to arrive at optimistic understandings about the nature of God.

46. Brad Baumgartner, *Weird Mysticism: Philosophical Horror and Mystical Text* (Lanham, MD: Lehigh University Press, 2020).

47. Eugene Thacker, *Starry Speculative Corpse* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2015), 39–42.

48. Thacker, *Starry*, 42.

49. Thacker, *Starry*, 42.

50. Joseph Packer and Ethan Stoneman, *A Feeling of Wrongness: Pessimistic Rhetoric and the Fringes of Popular Culture* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 2018), 23.

51. Packer and Stoneman, *A Feeling of Wrongness*, 23.

52. Packer and Stoneman, *A Feeling of Wrongness*, 116.

53. Packer and Stoneman, *A Feeling of Wrongness*, 167.

54. Plato, *Meno*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John Cooper (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1997), 886.

55. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Stephen Scully (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003), 69.

56. Plato, *Phaedrus*, 52–53, 68.

57. Twenty-first-century sensibilities have acknowledged the epistemological limits of human knowing and the grammatical limits of language and have disrupted the Enlightenment-era confidence in complete rationalism. Moreover, twentieth-century rhetoricians, like Kenneth Burke, Richard McKeon, Chaim Perelman, and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, have aptly shown how rational certainty does not necessarily fuel rhetorical communication. They call this modern rhetorical understanding the "new rhetoric." "New rhetoric"—which can include the contemplative rhetoric of horror—can transcend modes of political speeches, marketing, and other traditional persuasive texts. Although political speeches and marketing advertisements certainly offer types of rhetorical communication, Richard McKeon explains in his 1970 essay "Philosophy of Communications and the Arts," that "new rhetorics" broaden the rhetorical arts to include "all elements of existence," which surpass common topics and seeks the "discovery of the unknown" (Richard McKeon, "Philosophy of Communications and the Arts," in *Rhetoric: Essays in Invention and Discovery*, ed. Mark Backman [Woodbridge, CT: Ox Bow Press, 1987], 119).

58. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 159–60.

59. Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 71.

60. Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror*, 102.

61. Richard Lanham, *The Economics of Attention: Style and Substance in the Age of Information* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), xii.

62. Lanham, *The Economics of Attention*, 25.

63. Ward Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method: A Practitioner's Handbook* (Boston, MA: Godine, 2021), 9.

64. Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method*, 9.

Chapter 1

What Is Catholic Horror Literature?

Catholic horror—horror fiction that integrates Catholic perspectives into the fiction itself—may be seen by Catholics to be incompatible with the genre's mission. These skeptics may argue that popular culture media such as horror novels, horror television shows, and horror films are not appropriate or effective forms of Catholic communication. For example, Stephen King's *'Salem's Lot* includes a priest character, Father Callahan, who is depicted accurately as Catholic clergy,[1] but the novel does not communicate much Catholic theology itself. Therefore, the novel is not Catholic horror. The 2013 film *The Conjuring* involves a possession and exorcism narrative, but the film ultimately ends with the mother, Carolyn Perron (Lili Taylor), spiritually combatting the demon—without much help from God. Not only does the film neglect Catholic theology, but it inverts it to favor secular humanism. Therefore, like *'Salem's Lot*, *The Conjuring* is also not Catholic horror. Ultimately, Catholic horror fiction communicates more than Catholic references or images; it communicates Catholic theological outlook, which demands particular patterns of reasoning and habits of mind. And this may be why genuine Catholic perspectives are not particularly prevalent within the history of horror film and literature. It is difficult to do well.

In some ways, conservative perspectives may be valid when they question horror's compatibility with Catholic values;[2] however, it depends on the media, message, storytelling, and storyteller. Some Catholic media can effectively use the horror genre to communicate Catholic theological outlook, yet doing this well requires an intricate dialectical complexion. While examples of dialectical architecture will be explained in the next chapter and traced in subsequent chapters, this chapter outlines how horror can effectively cooperate with Catholic themes and attitudes. In many ways, this chapter responds to objections lobbied at Catholic horror and traces valuable rhetorical dimensions of Catholic horror fiction. This first chapter establishes

some of the broadband traits of Catholic horror, traits based on the popular genre, the roles of fear and shock, and purposeful references to evil. To this end, much of this chapter responds to the categorical assumption posed by audiences who may think that the horror genre is universally incompatible with Catholicism.

FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS

Generally, the horror genre aims to "bristle," frighten, and/or repulse audiences, an affect that is paradoxically sought after and enjoyed by audiences of the genre.[3] Willing audiences of horror expect uncomfortable affect. Due to these expectations, audiences are commonly not revolted to the point of abandoning the art experience; rather, they often enjoy the adrenaline-charge because, as horror theorist Mathias Clasen maintains, audiences recognize that frightening fictional scenarios are simulated "play behavior."[4] Much like nightmares where individuals eventually wake up in the comfort of their own beds, horror fiction allows audiences to experience danger and fear without facing actual consequences. In *The Philosophy of Horror*, Thomas Fahy similarly maintains that horror storytelling constructs playful fun. He even celebrates humor within horror storytelling since it facilitates play.[5] Alongside this type of playful excitement in audiences, more thoughtful types of horror can kindle profound moments of audience reflection or contemplation as well. These reflections are spurred by the urgency of the fictional events unfolding on the screen or on the page—alongside intellectual content or soul-stirring questions. As a rhetoric of fiction, Catholic horror can command both narrative drives. It can act to entertain but also to foster profound and urgent spiritual and/or philosophical experiences.

As a specific genre of fiction, horror offers a specific means of Catholic communication. Genres of fiction, as organizational categories of storytelling, offer sets of anticipated conventions that organize audiences' expectations. For example, in comedic genres, audiences expect humor; in adventure genres, audiences expect action and thrills; in horror genres, audiences expect frightening content. As horror theorist Noël Carroll notes, horror's genre conventions consist of the inclusion of an "impure"—sometimes "incomplete"—"monster" who evokes both fright and disgust from characters and, by extension, from the audience.[6] Horror storytelling, as a type of fictional art, uses these common conventions as central narrative ingredients to take the audience on an adrenaline-fueled adventure. Simply, Catholic horror acts in a similar fashion. Using fright and disgust in rhetorical manners, Catholic horror fiction intentionally evokes a Catholic theological orientation in readers. Consequently, Catholic horror art acts as a didactic and persuasive

means to an end, rather than an end in itself. As such, the horror genre serves as a persuasive communicative vehicle that can effectively convey Catholic truths to audiences.

However, the genre itself should not be reduced to sets of applied tropes to make "horror stories." As various horror writers make clear, for fiction to be classified as horror, it must evoke horror or terror as a feeling. In his introduction to the 1988 *Prime Evil* horror short story collection, horror expert Douglas E. Winter explains that great horror fiction "digs beneath our skin and stays with us"; therefore, it is not so reliant on shock but rather emotion.[7] This overall emotion evoked by horror fiction is orchestrated through three sub-feelings according to Stephen King. In *Danse Macabre*, King suggests that these feelings are revulsion, horror, and terror.[8] According to King, effective horror storytelling weaves together these three degrees of affect—with emphasis on horror (found in "amorphous" physicality) and terror (the "finest emotion" found in invisible speculative dread—such as, "what is behind the door?").[9] King admits that revulsion should be used as a last resort—and Catholic horror aligns with his strategy here. As this book will discuss (specifically in chapter 6 on Blatty's *The Exorcist*), revulsion can be purposefully used in Catholic horror literature; however, overusing the shock value of revulsion can obscure the rhetoric of contemplation. After all, theology primarily meditates on conceptual and invisible entities, not physical states. In other words, revulsion-heavy approaches found in the "extreme horror" subgenre (such as novels written by Edward Lee, Bryan Smith, Monica J. O'Rourke, and others) are not particularly effective in Catholic horror literature—and are therefore naturally absent from Catholic literature. Instead, Catholic horror literature focuses on horror and terror dimensions of King's triad: fearing invisible implicit threats rather than the gratuity expressed by visibly explicit gore.

Therefore, Catholic horror literature finds a strange bedfellow in writers of cosmic horror literature, such as atheist writer H. P. Lovecraft. In the introduction of Lovecraft's nonfiction book *Supernatural Horror Literature*, which describes the nature of effective supernatural horror fiction, he explains that such storytelling depends not only on dread but also wonder and ineffability.[10] He reinforces this same claim in 1937 in his how-to essay "Writing Weird Fiction," where again Lovecraft emphasizes building "mood" and "atmosphere" when cultivating "wonder."[11] Catholic horror almost exclusively concerns supernatural elements, and although Lovecraft did not favor religion, his insights about the effectiveness of supernatural horror genre precisely align with Catholic horror fiction. As the forthcoming chapters will show, Catholic horror fiction—assisted by its rhetorical dialectics—similarly nourishes mood, atmosphere, and wonder.

A Catholic brand of horror—when behaving as a means to an end—can act as an appropriate religious rhetoric. Still, genuine Catholic horror fiction is not typical in popular culture. Modern American popular media generally favors a secular humanist lens to accommodate diverse belief systems; or it favors Protestant Christianity since Protestantism is the dominant strain of Christianity in America. Both secular humanism and Protestant Christianity are often common attitudes expressed throughout popular modern horror media. As such, contemporary horror fiction certainly uses Catholic characters and references (especially in demonic possession narratives), but it can be difficult to locate Catholic horror literature that showcases sincere and theologically accurate Catholic attitudes.

This book will examine three authors' Catholic horror literature, spanning eighty years from 1891 to 1971, that expresses personal Catholic belief[12] while also being theologically genuine to the Catholic tradition. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these three authors include French writer and Catholic convert J. K. Huysmans, English writer and Catholic convert Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson, and American Catholic writer/screenwriter William Peter Blatty. However, these authors are not the only writers to insightfully—and rhetorically—tackle Catholic-informed horror fiction. Science fiction horror writer R. A. Lafferty, fantasy horror writer Gene Wolfe, ghost story writer Russell Kirk, best-selling horror writer Dean Koontz, and other authors are Catholic horror writers who deeply integrate Catholic themes into their short stories and novels.[13] Moreover, other horror writers have reverence for Catholicism—despite not being Catholic—and integrate a similar Christian or mystic cosmology into their works. These include Charles Williams (a fellow Inkling alongside J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and Owen Barfield), George MacDonald, William Hope Hodgson, and Arthur Machen.[14] Ultimately, as this book will show, Catholic horror literature provides insights into an intellectual orientation that extends across religious traditions and spiritual traditions. Horror fiction provides an arena that maintains the theological priorities of Catholicism while simultaneously engaging the intellectual imagination of a range of readers inside and outside of the Catholic tradition.

HORRORS OF RELIGION? HORRORS OF CATHOLICISM?

Before exploring the nuances of Catholic horror, religious horror fiction should first be examined. People may have reservations about religion in general, especially when it is communicated in popular culture. After all, religion has been an agent of bloodshed and suffering throughout millennia.

As a result, the Otherness of religion—or dimensions of Otherness—can be as feared as the horrors themselves. In *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen*, Douglas Cowen defines fear of religion as sociophobic; in other words, it is a cultural phenomenon since cultures teach people what to fear, and the cultural products reinforce fears that are taught.[15] However, he maintains that individuals do not altogether discard religion because of these fears; to many people, religion is still valuable in this pluralistic age. Instead, fear is evoked and employed through people's ambivalence toward religion.[16] He suggests that religious horror fiction explores this ambivalence. For example, some horror narratives evidence how audiences fear fanatical religions and cults. Fanaticism is common to religious horror fiction and acts as a common sociophobic expression of the religious Other.[17] It fuels horror stories such as Stephen King's short story "The Children of the Corn"[18] and H. P. Lovecraft's novella *The Shadow over Innsmouth*. In addition to fanaticism, audiences often fear sacred places like churches, crypts, or graveyards because they represent ambivalence between the living world and the dead world—as well as the juxtaposition between the world of the seen and the world of the unseen.[19] This sociophobic fear of sacred places pervaded Gothic literature[20] and continues to operate in religious horror to this day. And naturally, the literary repetition of sacred places throughout centuries of horror storytelling has helped reinforce the trope and the social fear itself.[21] Overall, religious horror's expressions of faith and its engagement with the apophatic tradition (or what Swiss Catholic theologian Charles Journet calls the "dark knowledge of God") evoke ambivalence and material uncertainty, thereby sparking discomfort and curiosity.

Critics of the Catholic tradition may well suggest that corruption within the Catholic Church can also be the subject of horror. In other words, they may interpret Catholicism as the agent of the horror itself. Some contemporary horror fiction expresses that very sentiment, including such films as *Stigmata* (1999, directed by Rupert Wainwright) and *Vampires* (1998, directed by John Carpenter): both represent Catholic clergy as the disguised source of evil and chaos.[22] However, horrific representations of Roman Catholicism are nothing new within literary fiction. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic literature commonly represented Catholicism as a primitive and corrupt institution. In the first preface of Horace Walpole's 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*, which is considered to be the first Gothic novel, Walpole clearly gestures to superstition-heavy Catholicism as contributing to the "darkest ages of Christianity."[23] Approximately thirty years later, Ann Radcliffe's *The Italian* repeatedly describes Catholic monks and nuns as ghostly and malevolent, and, in a way, demonic.[24] Furthermore, Radcliffe's novel portrays Catholic agents as oppressing the young couple of Vincentio and Ellena; they imprison and threaten the protagonists, and even attempt to kill Ellena.[25] Matthew

Lewis, a contemporary of Radcliffe, similarly critiques Catholicism throughout his 1796 novel *The Monk*. That said, Lewis seems to exploit scandalous dimensions of Catholicism for shock value in a more explicit manner than Radcliffe. Unlike Lewis's *The Monk*, Radcliffe's literature offers a more genuine Protestant mission for morality, freedom, and autonomy.[26] In short, these Gothic authors represent Catholicism as horror in itself. In doing so, they celebrate Protestantism as more realistic and enlightened than Catholicism—but most of all, more liberated and virtuous than Catholicism.

Outside of fictional representations, corruption in the Catholic Church—including instances of sexual abuse, cover-ups of wrongdoing, and the misuse of official indulgences—are certainly horrors in themselves. In the Catholic Church, these horrors stem from abuses of power that betray its ideal ethic.[27] Such abuses of power neglect Catholic ethical foundations of humility, temperance, social justice, human dignity, and the common good. In other words, such abuses ignore the Catholic guiding principles that are found throughout Catholic Magisterium, papal encyclicals/exhortations, and Catholic Social Teaching texts. Ultimately, the corruption stems from individuals' subversion or neglect of ideal philosophical and theological principles, rather than *from* the conceptual principles themselves and the *telos* of Catholicism.

The sociophobic fear of such unethical behavior arises from a range of concerns and affective responses. First, the abuses of power (and the failure to redress these abuses) are uncomfortable because they have actually taken place; therefore, unfortunately, they are not merely imaginative fictions. Secondarily, as Cowen points out, these abuses are especially frightening because they violate the comfort and trust that is commonly associated with churches and clergy.[28] Finally, modern democratic cultures—and the identities they foster—such as that of the United States have been born out of an enthusiastic revolt against orthodox and hierarchical European institutions, which include Roman Catholicism.[29] Therefore, in these modern cultures, Catholicism can be still feared as threatening the foundation of democracy.

Acknowledging these reservations and moral concerns, this book suggests that it is possible to maintain that Catholic literature drives to inspire good. Engaging the intellectual imagination, Catholic literature rhetorically communicates virtuous principles to help combat corruption, cultivate ethical behavior, and heal the church and the world. And Catholic horror literature offers a similar message. In his survey of literature, Catholic scholar Joseph Pearce outlines this literary commitment to goodness. He explains that Catholic literature, such as the work of Dante, Flannery O'Connor, Evelyn Waugh, and J. R. R. Tolkien, and more general Western canonical literature such as Homer, Virgil, William Shakespeare, and Jane Austen, all imaginatively communicate self-sacrifice and edification—that is, they portray the

homo viator, or noble pilgrim, who wrestles with obstacles while journeying toward the good life.[30] As Pearce outlines, this movement toward edification is represented in the journeys of Dante's character of Dante, Tolkien's Frodo, Homer's Odysseus, Shakespeare's Hamlet, and many others. To this end, the literature disapproves of the *homo superbus*, or the viciously proud individual, who is imprisoned in their own desires.[31] The exercise of this same selfish desire is at the root of the immoral behavior inside the Catholic Church. Opposing such corruption, the literature seeks to imaginatively inspire wise, "saintly" conduct that curbs immorality. Catholic horror fiction seeks similar aims, albeit through darker representations. It instructs and/or reminds audiences (which can include church authorities) about the ideal contemplative and discerning *homo viator* who quests toward goodness.

CATHOLIC MORAL THEOLOGY

Although the *homo viator* permeates Catholic horror literature, skeptics may still wonder how a dark genre like horror can specifically communicate Catholic moral theology and Catholic Social Teaching. Both areas of Catholic thought are based on several crucial precepts. Fundamentally, Catholic moral theology and Catholic Social Teaching demand the sacredness of human life at all stages; while this precept often brings hot-button issues like abortion and euthanasia to mind, it is important to note that Catholic tradition promotes the dignity of all human life from conception to natural death.[32] Because Catholicism asserts that God became human through Jesus Christ, it maintains that all human beings possess inherent dignity and infinite worth.[33] As a result, both Catholic moral theology and Catholic Social Teaching also promote human community and the common good. In this framework, human beings are one family united in solidarity even as they quest for individual fulfillment.[34]

Accordingly, Catholicism cautions against the betrayal of human dignity and the neglect of the common good. In his 1999 post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, Pope John Paul II spotlights this betrayal when he acknowledges "the helpless victims of abortion; the elderly and incurably ill, subjected at times to euthanasia; and the many other people relegated to the margins of society by consumerism and materialism." These groups become the victims of misguided values and practices that "[bear] the stamp of the culture of death . . . in opposition to the Gospel."[35] This statement harkens back to the pope's 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae*, where John Paul II proclaims that if a culture that does not respect human dignity, it will "revert to a state of barbarism."[36] Today, audiences may think that this

barbarism is romanticized and even celebrated in much popular media including films, books, television, music, and internet websites. A common Catholic attitude specifically assumes that horror movies, television, and books promote this barbaric "culture of death." From this perspective, it seems prudent that people should avoid these popular culture artifacts.[37] After all, death, pain, and torture—and the accompanying feelings of fear and anxiety—commonly pervade horror stories. For example, in "slasher" horror films and novels, distressed damsels run from masked killers. Or, in supernatural-based horror fiction, malicious demons inhabit and torture innocent people. By showing so much violence and evoking so much anxiety, popular horror fiction may be seen as a genre that normalizes death and fear. It can seem that horror stories work to undercut the dignity of human life. In response to these potential concerns about the genre, particular questions arise: How can horror be salvaged in respect to Catholic beliefs? Does horror merely advocate the "state of barbarism" that Pope John Paul II cautions against? Or can the nuances be separated out? Can Catholic communicators truly wield this genre of fiction as a powerful ethical force?

Through strategic use of rhetoric, Catholic horror can offer representations of death that ultimately highlight transcendental themes. Essentially, questions about suffering and mortality have always pervaded the Catholic tradition. Unlike some other Christian denominations, Catholicism does not shy away from foregrounding the pierced corpus of Jesus so often seen hanging on the cross behind altars in Catholic churches and around Catholics' necks on chains.[38] In the Catholic tradition, the Mass itself, the celebration of the Eucharist, seeks to commemorate the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. Also, the *ars moriendi* (dying well) tradition is a central focus in Catholicism,[39] especially throughout the fifteenth century.[40] Depicting the *momento mori* (a reminder of morality) in visual art and drama aimed to help people prepare for the reality of death. Moreover, much traditional Catholic art such as stained-glass windows portrays the lives of saints who were brutally martyred. These include figures like Saint Stephen who was stoned to death and Saint Sebastian who was tied to a post and shot with arrows. Unlike belletristic works of art like Michelangelo's ceiling frescos in the Sistine Chapel or Da Vinci's *The Last Supper* mural, which explicitly radiate beauty, goodness, and truth, some Catholic art represents darker dimensions of the faith in pursuit of similarly pious ends. Ultimately, horror literature can act as a parallel type of representational vehicle, although such writing requires an ironical reversal where Da Vinci and Michelangelo's art primarily does not. Catholic horror stories may evoke fear of death and suffering, but these texts persuade audiences to contemplate a reverse perspective recognizing the safety, hope, and peace that is found in God.

FINDING GOD IN THE CULTURE

Horror literature and film commonly fall under the umbrella of popular culture, which is associated with the vernacular, everyday references, and tastes of the general public. Artifacts of popular culture can seem antithetical to the productions found in high culture such as avant-garde literature or art-house cinema, which appeals to more refined or educated tastes. Still, these distinctions do not always stand in stark contrast. For instance, Dante's eloquent epic poem *Inferno* was written in Italian, the vernacular language of the time, rather than the loftier Latin language. Therefore, even *The Divine Comedy* was designed to appeal to the popular audiences of its time. Because modern horror fiction has such widespread appeal, it is important to acknowledge that Catholic horror is relevant to popular culture. Such an acknowledgment helps demonstrate that Catholicism is not opposed to aspects of the everyday world; rather, it sees God as immanent in the world and culture even as he remains external to human invention.

Bishop Robert Barron, a Catholic authority known for his celebration of popular culture, provides insight into how to recognize Catholic truths surfacing within popular culture. In the twenty-first century, Bishop Robert Barron has gained popularity with his Word on Fire ministry, website, and New Media. In the early 2000s, he gained initial traction through his YouTube reviews of popular culture artifacts (film, novels, and music) and interviews with thought leaders and celebrities like Jordan Peterson, Shia LaBeouf, and Mark Wahlberg. Many of his reviews of artifacts were transcribed and collected into a volume titled *Seeds of the Word*. As a collection that analyzes Catholic theology as it is represented in the popular world, *Seeds of the Word* explores topics such as the spiritual elements of the film *Eat, Pray, Love* (2010) and Christian dimensions of several Coen Brothers' films. In the preface of his book, Bishop Barron draws on a point made by Robert Sokowolski, his theological mentor at Catholic University of America, explaining that kernels of Catholic truth are strewn about the world and find their way into popular culture.[41] Along these lines, horror fiction is not exempt as an arena that contains these strewn Catholic truths. The horror genre can also explore and represent Catholic doctrine.

In his article "From Correlation to Assimilation: A New Model for the Church-Culture Dialogue" found in the academic journal *Nova et Vetera*, Bishop Barron more formally explains this approach to "finding God in the culture"—that is, interpreting popular culture through the lens of Catholicism. Barron highlights John Henry Newman's theory of assimilation outlined in the influential Catholic text *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Drawing parallels to how organisms survive in the wilderness, Newman

suggests that the church must absorb what allows it to thrive and repel anything that compromises the essence of the church.[42] However, Bishop Barron is sure to point out that this assimilation does not mean that the Roman Catholic Church needs to adopt worldly ideas. Such assimilation moves in the other direction. As defined by the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudiam et Spes*, the Catholic Church is not to mirror the world, but rather it should help the world mirror the church.[43] Therefore, in the Catholic tradition, the Roman Catholic perspective should not adapt to horror fiction; rather, Catholic horror fiction should adapt to Roman Catholic perspective. Accordingly, Catholic horror should, to use Charles Taylor's terms, communicate an enchanted world rather than exclusive humanism.

But why should Catholics embark on such a perilous search? Why should they wade through a potential "culture of death"—that is, horror fiction—in search of Catholic truth? Why should they parse through the weeds of popular culture to locate hidden treasures of inner beauty? Unlike past Christianized eras like the Middle Ages, it is sometimes difficult to find contemporary Catholic communication that is untouched by secular culture.[44] As a result, seekers can find religious or spiritual dimensions where they can, including within popular culture. Moreover, in today's post-Christian world, audiences who encounter Catholic doctrine may easily misinterpret its complexity; therefore, they may find it valuable to look to comprehendible representations that reveal genuine Catholic attitudes. A user of New Media himself, Bishop Barron encourages others to use New Media to disseminate Catholic messages within popular culture. The Second Vatican Council endorses such activity, inviting Catholics into "the means of social communication" through popular media in accordance with church teachings.[45] To this end, artists can use particular genres to craft powerful narratives that harness particular rhetorical functions and emphasize transcendent values (the Good, True, and Beautiful)—leading others toward clearer understandings of the faith.

Horror fiction provides a distinctive type of narrative to convey Catholic truths to audiences. Naturally, succeeding in such an endeavor requires engaged, thoughtful, and discerning audiences. But more important, the artist must work with surgical precision to strike a delicate balance in conveying Catholic truths. After all, it can challenge communicators of Catholic stories to shape aggressive content into inspiring sacramentals that help others spiritually grow. Ultimately, the form and content of the discourse can be oriented toward sacramental ends. As articulated by Thomas Aquinas and highlighted by Bishop Barron, the sacraments, as instrumental causes, unfold grace.[46] In Catholicism, the sacraments perform that causal function. Functioning similarly (but not identically) to the sacraments, Catholic fiction—which can include Catholic horror—can provide instrumental causes that can move audiences toward loving and spiritual lives.

CENSORSHIP AND INDIVIDUAL DISCERNMENT

Catholics are often apprehensive about horror fiction—and rightly so. Horror fiction may seem too provocative and obscene to be accepted by the Catholic Church. This stance is natural. Throughout the history of Catholicism, the Church has censored certain popular works if they were defined as "obscene." Famously, the National Organization for Decent Literature (NODL) acted as an American Roman Catholic pressure group from late 1938 through 1969. The NODL urged businesses and vendors to restrict American youth from accessing magazines, comic books, and paperback books that were considered offensive according to its specific code.[47] Official Roman Catholic Canon Law administered from the Vatican ultimately supported the NODL's pursuit. Importantly, the Legislation of the Code of Canon Law recommended censorship of particular books, as it pertained to Catholics and not the wider public. After all, Canon Law does not explicitly extend to secular civil law. Specifically, Canon 1399 forbids Catholics to consume fictional works that "professedly discuss, describe or teach impure or obscene matters."[48] However, as Jesuit scholar Harold C. Gardiner points out, Canon Law does not define "obscenity" here; it only states that if a book is obscene, then Catholics should not read it.[49] Since the Canon Law is vague here, Gardiner insists that theologians can be consulted on determining what the term "obscene" actually means. According to theologians, the term "obscene" relates to complete works of literature, not merely quotations or passages from the work in question. Moreover, the "obscene" work must arouse in a reader, or be intended to arouse, "venereal pleasures"—which includes the voluntary act of thinking about venereal pleasure.[50] Outside of the realm of sexual desire, Gardiner's point is that obscene literature has to arouse voluntarily thoughts of immorality or acts of immorality. This type of indecency differentiates obscene literature from literature that may be considered vulgar, disgusting, or crude. Subsequently, the Catholic Church may discourage vulgar, disgusting, or crude media, but the church cannot officially forbid such media.[51]

In the 1960s, the Second Vatican Council officially modified the church's perspective on censorship within their council documents *Inter Mirifica* and *Dignitatis Humanae*.[52] In June 1966, one year after the close of the council, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (previously the Holy Office) issued a notice repealing the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, the list of publications deemed heretical.[53] The church could still warn Catholics about particular books, and Catholics were still advised to avoid books that were dangerous to faith or morals, but the ultimate decision was allocated to the conscience of the individual. This profoundly moved Catholic censorship

away from a system of canonical prohibition toward a system of individual moral rebuke.[54] Like many of the Vatican II changes, the laity became more empowered and did not need to rely so much on clerical authority. As a result, this shift opened more expansive and creative avenues for freer Catholic communication and art. It seemed to take some of the formal pressure off artists who wished to communicate Catholic themes and ideas. Today, ecclesiastical authorities still provide official guidance about certain texts—specifically, "*imprimatur*" and "*nihil obstat*" as official seals of Catholic Church approval; however, much discernment has shifted into artists' and audiences' hands.

As a result, Catholic laypeople must consult their consciences in accordance with the teachings of the church before creating or consuming particular works of art, film, or literature. Rather than depending only on Catholic authorities to explain what is acceptable, Catholic laypeople are taught to consult their consciences. In Catholicism, the term "conscience" is a complex concept. In *Vertitas Splendor*, a papal encyclical written in 1993, Pope John Paul II explains that having a good conscience involves seeking the received objective truth and making evaluations in accordance with that same received objective truth without being confused by what one subjectively considers to be true.[55] The freedom to evaluate the truth and goodness of particular art can be seen as a democratization of the censorship process; however, it can also lead to confusion—especially for those Catholics who may not be particularly educated about Catholic doctrine. Therefore, John Paul II implores that Catholics should consistently "form their consciences" and "make it the object of a continuous conversion to what is true and to what is good" in consultation with one's "heart" and in accordance to the dogmas established by the magisterium of the Catholic Church.[56] After all, as the pontiff recognizes, "the conscience is not an infallible judge and therefore it can make mistakes"[57]—especially for Catholics who do not continuously refine their consciences in accordance with doctrines of truth and goodness.

Although numerous other factors contributed to changing attitudes toward literature and film in the 1960s and 1970s, the shift in Catholic censorship certainly played a role. Overall, the line between obscenity and vulgarity became blurred in particular pieces of art in these decades. Horror literature and film became a hotbed for such blurring. Consequently, Catholic audiences had to engage in the difficult task of discerning whether a horror novel or a film was being provocative for its own sake or for the purpose of conveying a more dignified message. As an additional level of complexity, some obscene/vulgar horror media seemed to champion Christianity in the art. For example, the successful novels/film adaptations of *The Amityville Horror* (novel: 1977; film: 1979), *The Sentinel* (novel: 1974; film: 1977), and *The Exorcist* (novel: 1971; film: 1973) all emphasize how protagonists triumph over evil entities with the assistance of Christianity. However, other novels/

film adaptations with more ambivalent Christian characters and themes such as *Witchfinder General* (novel: 1966; film: 1968) and *The Devils* (book: 1952; film: 1971), can be interpreted as either Christian or anti-Christian.[58]

Ultimately, the church's move to place authority in the hands, heads, and hearts of artists and consumers opened up a range of creative and interpretive possibilities. To this day, discernment of those possibilities continues to play an important role within the rhetoric of Catholic fiction—and especially horror fiction, since the horror genre depends on evoking repulsion and disgust in audiences, often in vulgar manners. Accordingly, Catholic horror fiction must walk a delicate line when featuring disgusting content, so that it does not potentially tip into the obscene. Again, the Catholic Church cautions against fiction that misleads audiences toward embracing sinful activity. That said, effective Catholic horror can make conscientious use of repulsive and vulgar narrative elements without essentially sliding into obscenity or blasphemy. Ironically, Catholic horror may be able to actually counter obscenity *through* the use of disgusting and vulgar elements.

WHY HORROR?

Before exploring the distinctive methodology of Catholic horror, it is important to consider another foundational question: Why Catholic *horror*? After all, Barron's "seeds of the Word" are strewn about popular culture via a variety of genres such as fantasy, mystery, drama, and science fiction. For instance, fantasy writer J. R .R. Tolkien wrote as a Catholic. In some ways, his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy offers an allegorical expression of Christian morality—specifically Catholic morality. Among many examples from Tolkien's trilogy, the Ring of Doom carried by Frodo throughout all three books can make the wearer invisible, a phenomenon that rearticulates the Ring of Gyges hypothetical scenario from Plato's *Republic* (359a–360d),[59] an influential text in the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. In both works, the power of the ring conveys the idea that morality extends beyond individual happiness and pleasure. Moreover, the ring represents the temptations of intemperate selfishness, showing how such sin can corrupt individuals and potentially turn them into a monster like Gollum. Outside of Catholicism, C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* series also shows how fantasy lends itself to Christian themes. Lewis represents Christ through the character of Aslan, who undergoes experiences akin to the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection.[60] However, Catholic and Christian themes are not only reserved for fantasy genres in popular culture. Alfred Hitchcock, a Catholic filmmaker, integrates Catholic themes and concerns into popular mystery films as well. As Barry and Eloise Knowlston point out in their 2011 essay "Murder Mystery Meets Sacred Mystery,"

Hitchcock's 1953 film *I Confess* explores the Catholic sacrament of penance. According to the authors, the film illustrates the tension between crime and sin as well as the mysterious sacredness of God's forgiveness.[61] Therefore, the initial question I raised can be specified: if other genres have the representational power to convey Catholic or Christian truths, why can Catholic horror fiction be seen as a particularly apt genre of representation?

What specifically sets horror apart from other genres such as fantasy and science fiction? The distinction can be distilled down to the genre's affect of fear. As already established, horror is distinctive from other genres in that it fosters feelings of fear in audiences. Some skeptics may think that fear, as an off-putting emotion, should be categorically avoided when discussing Catholic truths. However, the affect of fear can serve a rhetorical role in Catholic discourse. As noted by F. X. Schouppe, SJ, in his imprimatur text *Dogma of Hell*, sometimes the love of God can motivate people toward a more pious attitude; while other times, fear of damnation can motivate people to develop a more pious disposition. In fact, Schouppe points out that even the benevolent Jesus made people afraid to warn others against the dangers of damnation.[62] Fear can offer an appropriate emotional response to the possibility of eternal damnation. In causing audiences to feel such fear horror fiction has the potential to motivate sinners to change their behavior and embrace a more penitent life. As Thomas Aquinas argues, the passions, if moderated by reason, are a resource for fostering the moral life;[63] therefore, fear, as a type of passion, can be tempered to motivate individuals toward goodness.

Besides acting as a rhetorical motivator, how can fear be philosophically reconciled with piety? Using Aristotle as a touchstone, Aquinas explains that fear is a "special passion of the soul" because it is based on an external object. Like the special passion of hope, which looks toward "a future good, difficult but possible to attain," fear looks toward "a future evil, difficult and irresistible."[64] Consequently, fear must be directed toward an external object or condition. According to Aquinas, one cannot fear oneself.[65] Additionally, Aquinas explains that people become afraid only if there is a chance that they can actually escape the imagined future of corruption or pain. If the future is fully certain, then one does not need to be afraid.[66] Subsequently, fear, within moderation, can help an individual "take council and work with greater attention" so that they can evade corruption and pain.[67] For Aquinas, fear only "hinders action" if it interferes with one's ability to reason clearly.[68]

Twentieth-century theologian Josef Pieper explains how fear can strengthen the health of one's soul. Gesturing to Natural Law, Pieper notes that the "correspondence to reality is the principle of both health and goodness."[69] He further explains that since fear is a natural part of reality, then it can help facilitate health and goodness. He also mentions that in modern culture, we

often try to reassure ourselves to the point of attempting to eliminate fear completely from our lives.[70] Pieper clarifies that fear can play an important guiding role in our lives. After all, he states, "nothing is so fearful that the strong cannot bear and endure it with dignity."[71]

As noted by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* and restated by Pieper, courage is not the same as fearlessness. Rather, courage requires a moderate amount of natural fear. Pieper asserts that the "Christian rule of life will never teach that we should not or must not be afraid of the fear-inducing."[72] He states that Catholic theology supports this claim. Specifically, he explains that courage keeps human beings loving their lives in such ways as to not give up living. Similarly, the fear of God can be seen as the fear of losing eternal life. He claims that this is the "foundation of all Christian courage."[73] Therefore, according to Pieper, fear is required to be courageous, and courage keeps individuals living ethically and healthily in correspondence with God and the eternal law. Ultimately, Catholic horror fiction can provide an imaginative venue to experience fear and thus ponder what it means to be courageous in one's Earthly life and spiritual life. Within this ethical imaginary, fear associated with horror can play a crucial role in helping audiences of any faith become more courageous in their daily lives or in spiritual matters.

In his essay "The Red Angel," celebrated Catholic writer G. K. Chesterton explains the role of fear in fairy stories, which can easily apply to horror tales as well. He notes that fairy stories do not instill fear in children, but rather fear comes from "the universe of the soul."[74] In other words, fairy stories do not produce the idea evil or ugliness because such notions come from the world itself.[75] Fairy stories, as well as horror stories, can communicate the possible defeat of the evil or ugly. Again, unlike cosmic pessimist horror, Catholic horror requires a sense of optimism toward the *Logos* without resorting to naivety. According to Chesterton, a fairy story acclimates the reader "to the idea that these limitless terrors had a limit, that these shapeless enemies have enemies in the knights of God, that there is something in the universe more mystical than darkness, and stronger than strong fear."[76] Ultimately, imaginative fiction in the Catholic tradition provides a "St. George to kill the dragon."[77] The evil elements of the stories help illuminate the power of goodness.

SHOCK APPEAL

Critics may view horror fiction as too shocking for Christian audiences. According to these counterarguments, the abrasive quality of horror fiction seems to disrupt the peaceful harmony of a well-ordered soul. However, these critics may forget that Christianity consistently relies on shock appeal

as an acceptable rhetorical device. This approach can be seen in the Gospels. For instance, Jesus did not shy away from calling himself the "Son of Man" when speaking to skeptics.[78] He shocked the disbelievers and offended devout Jews with these statements. As a result, Jesus shocked audiences into listening to him. In addition, some parables like the "Parable of the Marriage Feast" (Matthew 22:1–14) use violent imagery to shock the audiences into understanding the primary message. In this particular parable, a king sends his armies to kill and burn the cities of those people who did not accept his invitation to the marriage feast of his son. When the king finally gathers other guests for the wedding feast, he sees that one particular man is not dressed appropriately for the feast. The king then binds the man and sends him into the "exterior darkness," a place where there is "weeping and grinding of teeth." The shocking content and aggressive tone of Jesus's parable serves a rhetorical function. In the context of the parable, the king's use of death and violence figuratively emphasizes the severity of dismissing an "invitation" to share in the divine life of God.[79]

In more contemporary literature, the successful twentieth-century American Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor also used shocking plot points and characters in her fiction to reveal lessons about salvation and grace. As a writer of dark fiction, she often relies on portrayals of violence to communicate Catholic themes.[80] For example, in her short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the grandmother's final epiphany is communicated from the barrel of a convict's gun. He shoots her three times, symbolizing the grandmother's need for God's grace, something outside of herself. In addition, O'Connor spotlights grotesque characters throughout her stories, such as the mother with the face like a "cabbage" in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" or Hulga/Joy with the missing leg in "Good Country People." In these grotesque portrayals, O'Connor highlights the ignorance of the characters or their misinterpretations of sin or the spiritual world.[81] O'Connor wrote explicitly about her use of shock as a rhetorical technique. In 1969, she claimed, "When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures."[82] With this quotation, she summarizes how and why horror—a genre that uses violence and the grotesque—can work as a rhetoric vis-à-vis resistant audiences. Shock startles audiences, specifically resistant secular audiences, into listening or reading about religious themes.

As an imaginative genre where shock is a known convention, horror fiction provides an appropriate rhetorical vehicle for artists to awaken audiences toward a metaphysical understanding of reality. The shock holds rhetorical value: it helps jolt audiences into understanding the faith and, by extension,

developing the spiritual life. This approach differs from that of more extreme horror—such as grindhouse horror films and splatter-punk horror novels—that use shock appeal merely as an end, not as a means. Instead, the shock appeal of Catholic horror fiction propels readers and viewers toward a Christian theological perspective.

SPIRITUAL COMBAT

Another common objection to the horror genre concerns evil imagery and satanic characters. Skeptics may accuse horror films as being too severe, especially when explicitly depicting demons, the devil, and other manifestations of evil. Such skeptics may appeal to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in such matters, specifically, Article 1868 about the "proliferation of sin." According to this article, "we have a responsibility of the sins committed by others when we cooperate in them [. . .] by participating directly and voluntarily in them."[83] Therefore, skeptics may posit that audiences should avoid the risk of participating in obscene horror, especially extreme violent "torture-porn" horror (such as *Hostel* and the *Saw* film franchises) where the text itself potentially draws viewers into sin by normalizing promiscuous sex, violence, and exposure to evil. Certainly, it can make sense for discerning individuals to avoid this type of hyper-gratuitous horror fiction. However, unlike overbearing and gratuitous modes of horror, Catholic horror media can resist violence as an end in itself, instead recognizing violence as a byproduct of spiritual combat; these narratives can portray violence as terrifyingly evil and thus as something that should be avoided. In short, not all violent horror narratives or horror narratives that portray evil are categorically inconsistent with the Catholic mission.

Since the Second Vatican Council, Catholics have sometimes glossed over the existence of diabolic activity. Contemporary Catholics may resist what they consider "unenlightened" discussions about hell, the devil, or demons. However, twenty-first-century Catholic clergy, cardinals, and popes remain steadfast in their discussions about hell, demons, and the devil; the Roman Catholic doctrine about their existence has not changed. For example, in his 2015 book, *God or Nothing*, Cardinal Robert Sarah emphasizes the referential dimension of spiritual combat in Catholicism and curtly proclaims, "Hell is a reality, not an idea."[84] Cardinal Sarah lauds Pope Francis's repeated discussion of the devil, especially Pope Francis's homily of his first Mass as pope, where the pontiff took a hard-line stance proclaiming, "Anyone who does not pray to the Lord, prays to the devil."[85] Both Cardinal Sarah and Pope Francis assert claims about hell as part of the Catholic spiritual reality.

Horror narratives that involve demonic possession and spiritual combat invigorate a similar type of spiritual discourse. By forwarding referential claims about spiritual combat, these horror narratives can offer powerful evangelical rhetorics. For example, Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order and a sixteenth-century Catholic saint, became inspired to practice Catholicism more fully after embracing spiritual combat. When bedridden between the years 1521 and 1522, Ignatius read a 1511 edition of *Flos Sanctorum* (a Spanish translation of *The Golden Legend*, a popular book on the lives of the saints), which included a prologue by Cistercian Gualberto Fabricio Vagad. In this prologue, Vagad describes the saints as "knights for God" who served the "ever victorious banner" of the "eternal prince, Jesus Christ."[86] Since Ignatius had previously served as a soldier and enjoyed chivalric literature, Vagad's militaristic rhetoric resonated with Ignatius.[87] Ultimately, it helped propel Ignatius into a more devout Catholic life and inspired him to establish the influential Society of Jesus.

Representations of spiritual combat can also strengthen a reader's or viewer's existing faith. As sixteenth-century Catholic mystic and saint Teresa of Avila advises, "Every time we make the demons the object of our contempt, they lose their strength and the soul acquires a greater superiority over them."[88] By witnessing simulated instances of spiritual combat in a horror story or novel, audiences can strengthen their contempt for evil as they cultivate habits of spiritual discernment. Ignatius of Loyola specifically defines the term "discernment" as "rules to aid us toward perceiving and then understanding, at least to some extent, the various motions which are caused in the soul: the good motions that they may be received, and the bad that they may be rejected."[89] More precisely, the word "discern" can be traced to *discerner* (Spanish) and *discerno* (Latin), which means to identify, judge, and separate; in the Ignatian sense, the term corresponds to the identification, judgment, and separation of good spirits from bad spirits.[90] Spiritual discernment offers a process of simultaneous contemplation and subjective self-examination; it involves rational and emotional self-awareness alongside spiritual sensitivity.

Twentieth-century Catholic mystic and saint Padre Pio developed a similar approach to discernment when he grappled with diabolic apparitions. According to sources, demonic forces would throw Padre Pio from his bed, upend the furniture of his bedroom, and appear as deceitful illusions.[91] However, after he became more accustomed to the attacks, Padre Pio felt a deep sense of spiritual joy while he combated the evil spirits.[92] Because he was being tested, he became closer to God. Similarly, audiences of all faiths can use Catholic horror, specifically horror about spiritual combat, to examine the "motions of the soul" to inspire and strengthen their faith in a Higher Power against temptations of sin. Additionally, audiences who do not identify with faith traditions or contemplative practice can benefit from

spiritual combat narratives as well. The stories can inspire audiences to reflect on issues of self-awareness, moral consciousness, and rational/emotional discernment—all of which inform everyday ethical decision making. How this inspiration can occur will be the subject of the next chapter, which outlines the foundational machinery of rhetorical dialectics.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Overall, the characteristics of the Catholic horror genre demonstrate that religious discourse need not censor horror fiction to accommodate religious or spiritual principles. Rather, the individual creator or consumer of horror merely needs to understand how the genre's traits can be deliberately deployed to maximize the rhetorical effectiveness of the message. Genre traits, then, act as opportunities rather than obstacles. It is often the case that critics of the horror genre mistake the genre as the message itself, rather than recognizing that the genre can serve the message. For instance, a violent horror novel does not need to advocate violence itself; the novel could demonstrate the undesirable ills of violence. It simply depends on how the genre is being rhetorically implemented in the context of the fiction. To read a horror text and assume an author's ill will may be an oversimplistic interpretation. Rather, within effective Catholic horror, genre traits can promote a range of philosophical and theological perspectives.

The Catholic tradition has a certain amount of resilience built into it. In *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Catholic thinker and saint John Henry Newman discusses the development of ideas in respect to the nature of truth, stating, "The stronger and more living is an idea, that is, the more powerful hold it exercises on the minds of men, the more able is it to dispense with safeguards, and trust to itself against the danger of corruption."[93] Strong systems of ideas can adapt to a culture and environment and maintain resilience without erecting firewalls that inhibit creativity. This strength can preserve religious truths within horror fiction. In other words, the genre cannot pervert particular truths if these truths drive the communicative use of the genre. In this way, it seems that Catholics do not need to categorically fear the genre of horror itself. As long as the Catholic horror subgenre rhetorically instructs readers about the theological understanding of reality (and respective ethical discernment) and refuses to present Catholic ideas as mere entertainment, this mode of horror does not collude with the "culture of death." Instead, it offers a communicative asset to inspire the hearts and minds of many different audiences.

NOTES

1. Since King is not Catholic, he consulted a priest during the writing of *'Salems Lot* to ensure that Father Callahan's characterization and internal monologues aligned with Catholic belief.

2. This refers to how some horror stories communicate violence/torture for its own sake—or may cultivate existential despair. Both of which do not align with Catholic values.

3. Mathias Clasen, *Why Horror Seduces* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017), 2.

4. Clasen, *Why Horror Seduces*, 58–59.

5. Thomas Fahy, *The Philosophy of Horror* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2010), 2.

6. Noël Carroll, "The Nature of Horror," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46, no. 1 (1987): 52–55.

7. Douglas E. Winter, introduction to *Prime Evil*, ed. Douglas E. Winter (New York: New American Library, 1988), 8.

8. Stephen King, *Danse Macabre* (New York: Everest House, 1981; repr., New York: Gallery, 2010), 22–26.

9. King, *Danse Macabre*, 25–26.

10. H. P. Lovecraft, "Supernatural Horror in Literature," in *Supernatural Horror in Literature & Other Essays* (Cabin John, MD: Wildside, 2008), 18.

11. H. P. Lovecraft, "Writing Weird Fiction," in *Supernatural Horror in Literature & Other Essays* (Cabin John, MD: Wildside, 2008), 117.

12. Personal Catholic belief is indicated by each of the authors' personal writings—both autobiographies and letters—about each of the texts.

13. For a specific list of Catholic horror writers, refer to the appendix.

14. For a list of writers who sympathize with Catholic horror storytelling, refer to the appendix.

15. Douglas Cowen, *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008), 56–59.

16. Cowen, *Sacred Terror*, 50–51.

17. Cowen, *Sacred Terror*, 207–9.

18. Cowen, *Sacred Terror*, 217–21.

19. Cowen, *Sacred Terror*, 122.

20. Cowen, *Sacred Terror*, 97.

21. Cowen, *Sacred Terror*, 114.

22. Cowen, *Sacred Terror*, 67.

23. David Salter, "'This Demon in the Garb of a Monk': Shakespeare, the Gothic and the Discourse of Anti-Catholicism," *Shakespeare* 5, no. 1 (2009): 52.

24. Salter, "'Demon in the Garb of a Monk,'" 55.

25. Salter, "'Demon in the Garb of a Monk,'" 57.

26. Salter, "'Demon in the Garb of a Monk,'" 58.

27. Ethics, in this sense, are grounded in premodern Virtue Ethics (associated with Aristotle), rather than modern ethics that are often influenced by utilitarianism.

28. Cowen, *Sacred Terror*, 74–75.

29. The Founding Mothers and Fathers of America were generally Protestant, not Catholic.

30. Joseph Pearce, *Literature: What Every Catholic Should Know* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2019).

31. Pearce, *Literature*, 1–2.

32. Jozef Zalot and Benedict Guevin, *Catholic Ethics in Today's World* (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011), 55.

33. Zalot and Guevin, *Catholic Ethics*, 55.

34. Zalot and Guevin, *Catholic Ethics*, 56.

35. John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America*, sec. 63, apostolic exhortation, Vatican, January 22, 1999, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america.html.

36. John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae, sec. 14, encyclical letter, Vatican, March 25, 1995, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html.

37. Although the National Organization for Decent Literature dissolved in 1969, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Catholic News Service (Media Review Office) still offers film reviews through their website to guide Catholics' consciences—and to assist Catholic families' decisions—about the moral offensiveness of films.

38. This differs in Protestant Christian denominations who typically display the cross without the corpus.

39. For a recent Catholic text on the subject, see Theresa A. Noble, *Remember Your Death: Momento Mori Lenten Devotional* (Boston, MA: Pauline, 2019).

40. Mary C. O'Connor, *The Art of Dying Well: The Development of the Ars Moriendi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942).

41. Robert Barron, *Seeds of the Word: Finding God in the Culture* (Des Plaines, IL: Word on Fire, 2015), x.

42. Robert Barron, "From Correlation to Assimilation: A New Model for the Church-Culture Dialogue," *Nova et Vetera* 7, no. 2 (2009): 393.

43. Barron, "From Correlation to Assimilation," 393.

44. Barron, *Seeds of the Word*, x.

45. Second Vatican Council, "Decree on the Means of Social Communication, *Inter Mirifica*, 4 December, 1963," in Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Postconciliar Documents, ed. Austin Flannery (New York: Costello, 1994), sec 1–2.

46. Robert Barron, "The Eucharist as the *Telos* of the Law in the Writing of Thomas Aquinas," in *Exploring Catholic Theology* (Ada, MI: Baker Academic, 2015), 138–39.

47. Thomas F. O'Connor, "The National Organization for Decent Literature: A Phase in American Catholic Censorship," *Library Quarterly* 65, no. 4 (1995): 386.

48. Harold C. Gardiner, "Moral Principles towards a Definition of the Obscene," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 20, no. 4 (1955): 561.

49. Gardiner, "Moral Principles," 561.

50. Harold C. Gardiner, *Catholic Viewpoint on Censorship* (New York: Image Books, 1961), 65.
51. Gardiner, *Catholic Viewpoint on Censorship*, 65.
52. O'Connor, "The National Organization for Decent Literature," 407.
53. O'Connor, "The National Organization for Decent Literature," 407.
54. O'Connor, "The National Organization for Decent Literature," 407.
55. John Paul II, *Vertitas Splendor*, encyclical letter (Boston, MA: Pauline, 1993), sec. 62–63.
56. John Paul II, *Vertitas Splendor*, sec. 64.
57. John Paul II, *Vertitas Splendor*, sec. 62.
58. For more on this, see my essay "Touring the 'Burning Times': The Rhetoric of Witch-Hunting Films, 1968–1973," in *Virtual Dark Tourism: Ghost Roads*, ed. Kathryn McDaniel (New York: Palgrave, 2018), 113–36.
59. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 47–49.
60. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (New York: HarperCollins, 2002).
61. Barry Knowlston and Eloise Knowlston, "Murder Mystery Meets Sacred Mystery: The Catholic Sacramental in Hitchcock's *I Confess*," in *Roman Catholicism in Fantastic Film: Essays on Belief, Spectacle, Ritual and Imagery*, ed. Regina Hansen (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).
62. F. X. Schouppe, *Hell: The Dogma of Hell* (Charlotte, NC: Tan Books, 1991), xxi–xxiii.
63. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), I–II, q. 24, a. 3.
64. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 41, a. 2.
65. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 42, a. 3.
66. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 42, a. 2.
67. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 44, a. 4.
68. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I–II, q. 44, a. 4.
69. Josef Pieper, "Courage Does Not Exclude Fear," in *Josef Pieper: An Anthology*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1989), 72.
70. Pieper, "Courage Does Not Exclude Fear," 68.
71. Pieper, "Courage Does Not Exclude Fear," 69.
72. Pieper, "Courage Does Not Exclude Fear," 70.
73. Pieper, "Courage Does Not Exclude Fear," 71.
74. G. K. Chesterton, "The Red Angel," in *Tremendous Trifles* (Glasgow: Moncrieffe, 2021; originally published in 1909), 54.
75. Chesterton, "The Red Angel," 54.
76. Chesterton, "The Red Angel," 54–55.
77. Chesterton, "The Red Angel," 54.
78. Examples: Matthew 12:1–8 and Mark 2:1–12.

79. Robert Barron, "The Parable of the Wedding," Word on Fire, October 15, 2017, https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/homily/the-parable-of-the-wedding-banquet/4513/.

80. Barron, "The Parable of the Wedding."

81. Thelma J. Shinn, "Flannery O'Connor and the Violence of Grace," *Contemporary Literature* 9, no. 1 (1968): 62.

82. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 34.

83. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 510.

84. Robert Sarah and Nicolas Diat, *God or Nothing: A Conversation on Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2015), 220–24.

85. Sarah and Diat, *God or Nothing*, 224.

86. George E. Ganss, "General Introduction," in *Ignatius of Loyola: Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, by Ignatius of Loyola, ed. and trans. George E. Ganss (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 16.

87. Ganss, "General Introduction," 16.

88. Paul Thigpen, *Saints Who Battled Satan* (Charlotte, NC: Tan Books, 2015), 219.

89. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises*, in *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, trans. and ed. George E. Ganss (New York: Paulist Press, 1991), 201.

90. Ignatius, *The Spiritual Exercises*, 423f129.

91. Thigpen, *Saints Who Battled Satan*, 176–77.

92. Thigpen, *Saints Who Battled Satan*, 176.

93. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (London: Longmans, Green, 1903), 188.

Chapter 2

What Are Rhetorical Dialectics?

Catholic horror literature does not simply gesture to Catholic theology throughout its storytelling—or dress up dogma through basic allegory. Courtesy of rhetorical dialectics, Catholic horror literature's unique communicative architecture calibrates contemplative orientations and structures philosophical thinking. Dialectic structures rhetorically immerse readers into philosophical, theological, and spiritual ways of thinking. They invite and familiarize readers with dialectical habits of mind. The fictions entice readers to participate in contemplative discourse.

Catholic horror literature offers distinctly Catholic modes of inquiry that depend on classical dialectics—that is, dialectical ways of thinking that were embraced and used in the classical era. The same method of thinking became Christianized in late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and it continued through the Renaissance before being inherited by liberal arts traditions today. Classical dialectics are appropriate to the Catholic narrative arts because they accommodate grander metaphysical, philosophical, and theological ideas. They allow vertical concerns to inform horizontal concerns. Therefore, they significantly differ from modern dialectics, which emphasize material conditions (such as Marxist dialectics) or social constructionism (which privileges invention over discovery). Instead, classical dialectics reach beyond utility; they reach toward discovering truth itself. To that end, they hospitably help "un-buffer" the self and open up the "porous self" toward *the* Reality rather than *a* reality. Ultimately, they foster *vita contemplativa* in the classical tradition and Catholic tradition. This chapter will outline key characteristics of the classical dialectic—and, in doing so, it will consult several important rhetoricians and philosophers. Next, it will consider the role of fictional philosophical conversation within contemplative literature. Finally, it will determine how rhetoric connects with the dialectic to become (the plural) rhetorical dialectics[1]—which differs from "dialectical rhetorics." Overall, this foundational chapter seeks to build a common vocabulary, clarify an ontology,

and ascertain the value of rhetorical dialectics that will be later traced and analyzed throughout specific Catholic horror novels.

WHAT ARE DIALECTICS?

To define the classical dialectic, several thinkers will be consulted for clarification. Mortimer Adler's book *Dialectic*[2] will provide a comprehensive look at the nature of classical dialectics. Supplementary rhetoricians/philosophers, such as Plato, Kenneth Burke, and Richard McKeon, will also be looked to for additional insights into dialectics.[3] Again, these thinkers emphasize the *classical* dialectic, which influenced but ultimately differs from modern Hegelian and Marxist dialectics.[4] As will be clarified, their nineteenth-century understandings of the dialectic diverge from the rhetorical dialectics found in Catholic horror literature.

As a twentieth-century thinker known for his zeal for classical liberal arts (as evidenced in *How to Speak, How to Listen* [1983], *How to Read a Book* [1940], and his Great Books literature series), Mortimer Adler published *Dialectic* in 1927. As a champion of the classical liberal arts, Adler studied under American philosopher John Dewey; but he refused Dewey's ardent pragmaticism. As shown in *Dialectic*, Adler celebrates the classical dialectical method of thinking as an impractical process—that is, truly liberal in its artistry.

Adler outlines two key characteristics that fuel dialectical thinking and communication. First, the dialectic offers an ongoing process of simultaneous philosophizing and communication. Therefore, the dialectic is not *product* based, but *process* based. Second, the process itself concerns oppositions. Powered by logical maneuvers, it volleys back and forth between opposing positions in a conversational manner. Combining these two important traits, Adler formally defines the dialectic as "a series of logical acts which constitutes the method for dealing with oppositions in discourse."[5] However, Adler more specifically cautions that dialectical opposition should not be confused with contradiction. Whereas contradiction denies a differing perspective, opposition celebrates the other perspective's otherness.[6] Specifically, opposition transitions from one position to another position without denying it.[7] As such, Adler insists that the dialectical negotiation of opposites continues without end. It resists absolute closure; it "has no end, in the sense of a conclusive, absolute, or final synthesis and resolution of opposites."[8] In other words, it "can never rest in any ultimate whole or final system which achieves an absolute resolution."[9]

For the dialectic to sustain momentum, it must remain impartial. Such an impartial dialectical process requires intellectual partisanship—and entertains

the possibility of each partisan position.[10] Such simultaneous entertainment of possibility becomes crucial to the openness of the process. In fact, Adler explains that the dialectic process is not particularly interested in establishing the final truth; "it is interested rather in what may or may not be true, that is to say, possibility. It is a process of entertaining any idea as possibly true."[11] Often embedded in organic intellectual conversation, dialectic demands intellectual prowess. In fact, Adler candidly admits that people who lack intelligence may not be able to fully partake in the dialectical process.[12] By entertaining partisan possibilities via conversation, the faculty of imagination must also be engaged in the dialectical process. Alongside the technical dialectics, participants must therefore possess intellectual imagination—and be willing to engage it.

Since the dialectic is fueled by ongoing intellectual reasoning that extends from opposing possibilities, the dialectic is compromised when facts enter the conversation.[13] Naturally, Adler recognizes the value of facts in discourse; however, factual demonstration differs from the dialectic process; specifically, factual demonstration does not require conversation about probabilities. Again, the dialectical process is continual. When a party introduces a position as a fact, they shut down the indefinite conversation. Similarly, Adler cautions against closure found in dogmatism as well.[14] Dogmatism can also shut down dialectic discussion since impartial dialectic should equally consider the probability of each position.

Also sympathetic to the classical dialectic, twentieth-century rhetorician Richard M. Weaver explains that dialectical terms rise from the "world of idea and action"; they do not emerge from empirical concreteness. In his essay "Concealed Rhetoric in Scientistic Sociology," he claims that dialectical terms are "words for essences and principles, and their meaning is reached not through sense perception, but through the logical processes of definition, inclusion, exclusion, and implication."[15] He cautions against positive terms mistakenly "collapsing" into dialectical terms in ways that ignore differences.[16] Much like Adler suggests, Weaver's dialectics do not pivot upon certainties or literal words but, instead, explore ambiguities found in disputes, ideas, and potential actions. To this end, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition finds dialectics to be valuable. As a set of intellectual tools, dialectics aptly serve Catholic philosophy and theology. They help thinkers explore and communicate possibilities that extend beyond everyday epistemology; in this way, dialectics cooperate with faith and deductive reasoning.

Whereas direct communication of dogmatism can be static and closed, dialectic is dynamic and participatory. According to Plato, dialectical dynamism depends on two simultaneous operations: separation and unity. These operations rely on both division and merging, activities celebrated by Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus* (265d–e).[17] According to Socrates, dialecticians surgically

divide content by "carving" ideas "at the joints" "not breaking any part as a bad carver might." They also merge content when "scattered particulars" unite as "one idea."[18] Socrates praises the dialectical mode for its "division and generalization" and "unity and plurality," which ultimately helps him "speak and think."[19]

In the more contemporary *Pragmatic Theory of Rhetoric*, rhetorician Walter Beale similarly explains how the dialectic drives discovery. Similar to Plato's Socrates, Beale explains that dialectics offer "ways of representing thought" that propel "movement from *analysis* to *synthesis*—from discovering difference and dividing things into parts to discovering likenesses and experiencing things as wholes."[20] Again, dialectical discussions that pursue understanding involve the simultaneity of separation (*diastole*) and unity (*systole*).[21] As shown by the Socratic Method displayed throughout Plato's dialogues, *diastole* differentiates two terms that may appear similar but are actually dissimilar; whereas *systole* traces common features between multiple terms.[22] The Socratic Method is fundamentally dialectical.

In his 1945 book *A Grammar of Motives*, literary critic and rhetorician Kenneth Burke provides a list of various definitions of "dialectic." Some of these definitions have already been revealed in the discussion of Adler, Weaver, and Plato. But Burke adds that dialectic is "discovery . . . by the give and take of converse and redefinition," "the art of disputation," and "the cooperation of competition."[23] Through these definitions, Burke highlights the competitiveness of the dialectic; however, paradoxically, its competitiveness is cooperative. Dialectics do not drive toward winning. After all, winning implies finality and closure. Again, as Socrates's dialectics model in Plato's dialogues, they transcend argumentation as sport.[24] And Socrates outwardly admits this in Plato's *Republic* when he praises the dialectical process:

> I'm sure you've noticed how when adolescents get their first taste of argumentation, they abuse it and treat it like a game. . . . They use knock-down arguments which they borrow from others to demolish people's positions. Like puppies, they love to tug away at anyone they come across and tear his arguments to shreds with theirs. . . . An older person . . . is hardly likely to succumb to this insanity: he'd sooner resemble someone who's willing to practice dialectic and look for the truth, than someone who trivializes everything with his game-playing and disputatiousness. His own behavior will be more moderate, and he'll increase, rather than decrease, dialectic's reputation. (*Republic* 539b, 539d)[25]

Whereas some contemporary horror media can certainly transgress norms in trivial and eristic manners much like Plato's reference to game-playing "puppy"-like "adolescents," Catholic horror media seeks the honorable and

mature pursuit: patiently using opposites to pursue truth within storytelling. In other words, as the forthcoming chapters will show, Catholic horror literature is fueled by such honorable dialectics, rather than impatient eristics.

Richard McKeon, another student of John Dewey at Columbia University, was also quite interested in honorable dialectic interplay. As a neo-Aristotelian, McKeon was specifically concerned about the cooperation between rhetoric and dialectic. He appreciated the architecture afforded by dialectical structures but demanded that dialectical missions ultimately serve rhetoric. By serving rhetoric, dialectic would avoid becoming dogmatic.[26] Resembling Adler, McKeon also insists that dialectic should avoid dogmatic claims. Moreover, when serving rhetoric, dialectic can rhetorically accommodate additional factors like voice, credibility, and the social milieu[27]—and avoid the dangers of dogma. Furthermore, McKeon insists that authentic dialectic is fueled by a principle of indifference when colliding inconsistent statements with one another.[28] The dialectic can energize literalness with ambiguity; and as such, it pluralistically opens up lines of inquiry and liberates intellectual potentialities.[29] By specifically analyzing parts and synthesizing wholes within discourse, the dialectic affords thinkers opportunities for intellectual gymnastics that allow them to more fully consider the coherence of human experience and various types of knowledge.[30]

Classical understandings and definitions certainly informed the creation of the Hegelian dialectic—but ultimately, they differ from the often more familiar nineteenth-century versions. Both Adler and McKeon recognized the merits and the insufficiencies of Hegelian dialectics. Adler explains that Hegel's philosophy essentially clashes with classical dialectics. In *Dialectics*, he writes that Hegel's philosophy "comes nearest to the conscious expression of dialectic as a method and as a theory; its only flaw, perhaps, is that it terminates in the Absolute Idea in which all oppositions are resolved. It surrenders the inconclusiveness of the dialectic process for an ultimate dogmatism."[31] He goes on to say that, if Hegel's "pyramid structure of trilogies" is the "beauty" of his superstructure, it is also its deficiency, "for the perfect pyramid must have some crowning stone . . . some last resolution of some last antithesis."[32] Hegel's dialectic has an endpoint that is not compatible with the ongoing dialectical operations found in Adler or Plato's dialectics.

Richard McKeon has a similar problem with Hegel's dialectic—and Marx's dialectic that was influenced by Hegel. As McKeon notes in his essay "Freedom and History," modern dialectics of Hegel and Marx are "comparatively rigid."[33] He explains that "they relate philosophy to history in such fashion that history is made to afford apparent evidence for the truth of one philosophy, and philosophy is made the ground for the inevitable occurrence of an age described as the final stage in the historical evolution of freedom."[34] These types of dialectic can suffocate literary and rhetorical analyses

because they "harden into universal prescriptions to be imposed if necessary, by force and subterfuge."[35] Therefore, to more fully celebrate the rhetorical freedoms found in Catholic horror literature, the rigid Hegelian and Marxist dialectics will not be consulted. Instead, the classical dialectic of antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the liberal arts is more fitting when tracing formalist elements of fiction. Whereas modern historical and material dialectics do not allow as much contemplative and theological freedom and are much rarer in Catholic horror fiction, classical dialectics are found throughout the Catholic Intellectual Tradition. The classical dialectic cooperates with Catholic theology, and accordingly, it often comprises the heart of Catholic horror fiction.

DIALECTICS WITHIN LITERATURE

Now that the relevant traits of the classical dialectic have been established, we must consider the following questions: How do they relate to the literary arts? How do they find themselves in novels? In her 1982 book *Novels and Arguments*, Zahava K. McKeon unpacks this relationship with technicality and profundity. She explains, "Dialectical organizations take into account ambiguity and tension and conflict, but the statement of principle which organizes the whole is a statement about the *truth* structure of the universe in which ambiguity, tension, and conflict are made intelligible."[36] She notes, "Ambiguity, tension, and conflict are in themselves the translative version of the intelligible structure of the universe."[37] In other words, a novel can provide this translative version as a rhetorical outward-facing vehicle—that is, a readable narrative—that readers can more fully understand and relate to. And she insists that a literary work's "rhetorical translative organization" shares the dialectical "middle as principle" because its "the infinite, timeless, two-termed nature" is identical.[38] To this end, rhetoric and dialectic can be seen as interchangeable dimensions within literature because "the terms of dialectical dichotomy are preserved as substantive" and "the terms of a translative dichotomy are a rhetorical commonplace."[39] The novel as a text incarnates this interchangeable dynamic of rhetoric and dialectic—and packages it as a digestible product for readers' imaginative and intellectual consumption.

The classical dialectic robustly emphasizes structural unities and pluralities in respect to the communication arts. Moreover, the classical dialectic acts as inquiry-forward rhetoric that scaffolds knowledge toward public discovery. This approach to rhetoric can be understood as *architectonic*. Richard McKeon specifically defines rhetoric as an *architectonic* art that scaffolds communication and helps audiences "extrapolate commonality from the uncommon."[40] Accordingly, imaginative horror literature—including Catholic horror literature—provides these "uncommon" arenas for various

readers to "extrapolate commonality." Consequently, this architectonic art does not offer proofs or demonstrations; rather, it seeks effective communication by securing audiences' understanding of expressible content.[41] McKeon's rhetoric offers a type of expressible "manifestation" that inspires curiosity in audiences.[42] It sparks innovation while purposefully guiding audiences into spaces of ambiguity.[43] Ultimately, McKeon's architectonic art liberates rhetoric from the traditional Aristotelian definition—that is, as persuasion[44]—and moves it into a sphere of creativity.[45] Moreover, it opens avenues of inquiry rather than closing them down.

In addition to Zahava K. McKeon and Richard McKeon's perspectives, Mortimer Adler also addresses how the dialectic cooperates within fiction. In *Dialectic*, he labels this as "metaphysical dialectic" or the "dialectic of the dialectic."[46] While the dialectic can certainly unfold within a work—for example, dramatically between characters—another kind of wider dialectic can operate. While an intra-textual dialectic works within a "universe of discourse," the discourse itself contrasts the world outside of the discourse, thereby crafting a dialectic between fiction and reality itself. In other words, since literature offers a fictional world as a representation of possibility, it dialectically operates with the natural world—that is, the world of actuality. Dialectic can unfold between the oppositions of possibility and actuality. Although the dialectic operates within the universe of discourse, it acts as interspace between fiction and reality—which offers a realm of possibility. Dwelling in this interspace, the overall intellectual value must be interpreted.[47] Therefore, the literature requires that readers imaginatively interact with the presented realm of possibilities. It also requires that readers engage with the external metaphysical dialectic in relation to the internal literary dialectic to extract representative value. In this way, the literature offers a symbiotic relationship between fiction and reality where readers are placed in the middle.

Twentieth-century Catholic science fiction/fantasy/horror writer R. A. Lafferty offers a more grounded explanation of this dialectic between imaginative possibility and actuality in a way that specifically relates to genre fiction. Without ever using the term "dialectic" in his nonfiction essay "The World's Narration," he seems to deem the dialectic as central to fiction storytelling. He boldly defines all fiction as science fiction because it contains "All the sciences and arts" and "all the speculations and innovations are in it."[48] He defines science fiction as the "central narrative of the World" because, to Lafferty, "fiction" means simply a "making" or "creation." In addition, "science" suggests "knowledge," which is merely another word for "Power" and "Illumination."[49] Therefore, a dialectic unfolds between these two competitive but cooperative forces: actuality or science on one hand, and imaginative creation on the other hand. In a rhetorical sense, Lafferty insists

that a wider understanding of science fiction acts as a "valid masquerade" or "parable" of the world; it wears a necessary mask that appears different from the World but, in fact, comments on the world itself. From here, he then criticizes "Mainstream Fiction" as too realistic. Mainstream fiction does not embrace the dialectic between fiction and science; instead, it depicts the science or real world without a masquerade. Lafferty describes mainstream fiction as wearing a mask that mirrors the face underneath; it therefore expresses an "invalid masquerade of the world."[50] Ultimately, mainstream fiction does not rhetorically engage the imagination to escort readers into a middle space of abstraction. Effective science fiction, which can encompass horror fiction, rhetorically escorts readers into that middle space. As a genre that specifically constructs supernatural possibilities, horror literature offers a myriad of imaginative narrative options. As such, imaginative genres like science fiction, fantasy, and horror offer a range of masks—more flexible masquerade options than the limited mainstream literary fiction—to escort readers into this dialectic.

PHILOSOPHICAL DIALOGUE

As a rhetorical-minded literary theorist, Kenneth Burke highlights "dramatic" dialectics within art. Specifically, he notes that artistic dialectics develop "interplay of various factors that mutually modify one another, and may be thought of as voices in a dialogue or roles in a play, with each voice or role in its partiality contributing to the development of the whole."[51] Since dialectics can be understood as rhetorically shaping pieces of fiction—specifically, novels—they concern this Burkean "development of the whole" alongside "cooperation of competition" toward "discovery." This development is incarnated within fictions by characters, characters' positions, and character-driven dialogues. The dialectical process is displayed for readers to imaginatively witness the exchange of perspectives—and intellectually consider possibilities. To this end, dialogue within literature plays a crucial role.

As evidenced throughout the Catholic Intellectual Tradition and papal encyclicals like Pope John Paul II's 1998 *Fides et Ratio*,[52] faith and reason cooperate in Catholicism. Therefore, it is appropriate that Catholic fiction represents dialectical dialogue unfolding between rational characters within its narratives. Rather than the metaphysical dialectical movement as suggested by Adler or the dialectic of "Science Fiction" as suggested by Lafferty, dialectical dialogues can scenically unfold as composite parts of the whole. In these dialectical dialogues, individual characters reason with one another to resolve opposite perspectives within particular situations—and while the

dialogues contribute to the overall story, they operate on a more granular level than the larger dialectics of the plot itself.

Philosopher Vittorio Hösle outlines the importance of philosophical dialogues within fictional scenes. By pursuing truth through exchanges of perspectives between characters, dialogues showcase the intellectual journeys of how truths are determined. Hösle insists that philosophical dialogues act as indirect communication. The fictional dialogue ultimately crafts conversations between author and reader in much more vivid ways than simply presenting readers with philosophical treatises.[53] Dialectical dialogues within fiction balance the solemnity of truth seeking found in philosophical debate with the imaginative play of fiction. It unites them in a way that resembles Adler's "dialectic of dialectic" and Lafferty's perspective of Science Fiction. And, as Hösle notes, the play of fiction and the imaginative dialogues can help readers grapple with the real world and prepare them for reality.[54]

Philosophical dialogues within fiction work well with Catholic themes since the Catholic tradition leans so heavily on rationality cooperating with faith. Moreover, dialogues help ease a wider range of readers into theological or philosophical discussion. For instance, dialogues help readers who may be unfamiliar with Catholicism or resistant to Christianity engage with thoughtful conversations about Catholicism or Christianity. Again, dense theological or philosophical theory would not be an effective or inclusive way to communicate to these audiences. Instead, dialectical dialogues within fiction immerse readers into organically thinking for themselves; they empower readers to think toward the truth by introducing intellectual tensions and controversies in social—albeit *artificially* social—ways. As mentioned by Hösle, Plato implements this strategy quite well. At the beginning of the *Republic*, Plato does not present readers with abstract theories of metaphysics and ethics. Instead, Plato gradually builds up to such abstraction by challenging cultural prejudices of contemporary culture and helping readers recognize inconstancies within their knowing.[55] He places this gradual movement toward abstraction within a dialogue between characters.

Since it can be off-putting for audiences to begin with abstract premises and end with concrete insights, dialectical dialogues reverse that process. They move readers from concrete parts to abstract wholes. General abstractions are ultimately the goal of philosophical dialogues and philosophical fiction. As Hösle points out, philosophical truths are general: "Philosophy is interested not in the particular qualities of an ordinary John Doe but rather in what constitutes the essence of humans or at least of a human type."[56] Roman Catholic fiction rows in a similar direction. It often explores general and abstract philosophical, theological, and spiritual insights. Its dialogues move readers up the ladder of abstraction toward species, genus, and beyond, rather than toward particularities. To this point, Hösle explains that great

art "combines the general and the particular in an ontologically fascinating way."[57] It resists overspecialization and celebrates the quest toward the universal. Furthermore, it seeks not to merely stimulate desire or emotion, which are certainly crucial to effective fiction, but to drive toward cognitive accomplishment. In other words, it rhetorically engages readers' rational faculties. Such engagement depends on effectively immersing readers into ambiguous subject matter. This immersion emerges from the collision of general and particular, and it requires labor on the part of the reader.[58] In other words, readers must not be told what to think; rather, they must interpret and arrive at particular insights for themselves by identifying with characters and characters' positions. In this way, readers do not merely read authors' opinions but, rather, subjectively internalize and experiment with perspectives as they organically progress toward knowledge.[59] The dialectical art communicates knowledge indirectly in this manner.[60] As demonstrated by the four Catholic horror novels that are analyzed in this book, dialectical dialogues act as a crucial component in Catholic horror fiction, for these dialogues unfold in each of the novels.

DIALECTICAL ORIENTATION

Literary dialectics become actively rhetorical when they move from two-dimensional dialectics (on the page) to three dimensional dialectics (outward from the page). The back-and-forth movements within the text extend outward toward the back-and-forth between the text and readers.

As the forthcoming chapters will show, Catholic horror literature demonstrates how three-dimensional dialectics rhetorically complicate the communication of one-dimensional and two-dimensional dialectics. By exploring dialectical intersections, the literature introduces three-dimensional dialectics that can effectively communicate positions and accommodate audiences. In his 2015 book *Dialectical Rhetorics*, Bruce McComiskey spotlights dimensional rhetorics as opposed to dialectics. Whereas dialectics qualifies the rhetoric in McComiskey's investigation of "dialectical rhetorics," "rhetorical dialectics" addresses how rhetoric qualifies the dialectics. Despite this nuanced difference, McComiskey's insightful one, two, and three rhetorical dimensionalities can behave similarly within rhetorically minded dialectics. As such, they are important to trace in respect to the outward-facing nature of rhetorical dialectics.

McComisky outlines three dimensions of rhetoric: one dimensional, two dimensional, and three dimensional. One-dimensional rhetoric promotes a single orientation without introducing an opposing position, while two-dimensional rhetoric acknowledges and responds to counter-positions.[61] Rather than

unification or opposition, three-dimensional rhetorics offer space for social negotiation and individual affectivity. Specifically, McComiskey nods to John Muckelbauer's 2008 book *Future of Invention* where Muckelbauer draws from postmodern theorists like Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze.[62] Muckelbauer suggests that three-dimensional rhetorics introduce a sophistic or nomadic traveler who uncovers "inventive strategy" without a *telos*, yet still "does not proceed blindly."[63] To this end, three-dimensional rhetorics allow for multiple flexible differences from outside participants.[64] Although McComiskey's discussion generally considers digital texts and mediums, three-dimensional rhetorics can similarly accommodate diverse readerships of literature as well—albeit in less active ways.

As the counterpart to three-dimensional rhetorics, three-dimensional *dialectics* can also accommodate audience difference with more ease. After all, like one-dimensional rhetorics, one-dimensional *dialectics* are tightly bound toward a logical conclusion and, like two-dimensional rhetorics, two-dimensional *dialectics* move through specific binary oppositions toward resolution. Three-dimensional dialectics, on the other hand, allow space for diverse audiences. This difference is fueled by readers' outside perspectives. Literature and imagination robustly engage this type of participation and inclusivity. As literature, Catholic horror fiction creatively provides the rhetorical space for readers to actively enter the dialectic as three-dimensional participants. Through literature, writers facilitate such invitation by providing a nexus of dialectical convergences for readers to walk through. Readers enter the nexus alongside fictional characters and negotiate multiple overlaying oppositions as third parties. Ultimately, authors of Catholic horror literature engineer such rhetorical avenues for readers to participate in the dialectics of narrative.

Importantly, McComiskey points out that three-dimensional rhetorics are not better than one- or two-dimensional rhetorics—rather, they are more socially participatory.[65] Each type of rhetoric serves distinct roles that fit particular contexts. Similarly, within Catholic horror fiction, one- and two-dimensional *dialectics* also play different roles. As such, they work within overarching three-dimensional dialectical frameworks. The varied uses of these dialectics depend on fictional rhetorical situations, creative visions, and the textual containers. Although one- and two-dimensional dialectics may be less participatory and less complex than three-dimensional dialectics, they still behave rhetorically. Three-dimensional dialectics, however, persuasively engage readers by orchestrating a rhetorical plurality of all three dialectical approaches.

For example, as will be discussed in chapter 6, vertical-horizontal dialectics play an important role in William Peter Blatty's 1971 novel *The Exorcist*. *The Exorcist* offers an artificial dialectical nexus wherein readers read *about*

both psychologists and clergy who dialectically interrogate Regan, a girl possessed by the demon Pazuzu. At the same time, readers also become *actively part of* and find themselves *in the middle of* the dialectical situation when they identify with Damian Karras, a Jesuit priest who stands at the nexus between science and religion, reason and faith, and doubt and belief. The novel offers different degrees of imaginative participation. Throughout the novel, Blatty uses dialogical dialectics to rhetorically communicate multiple layers of oppositions. The same type of approach—albeit with some literary and rhetorical differences—can be seen in the other works of Catholic horror that will be examined in forthcoming chapters, such as J. K. Huysmans's 1891 novel *Là-Bas* and the early twentieth-century ghost stories of Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson.

The horror genre can offer ideal conditions for dialectical architecture and rhetorical participation. After all, the genre allows for imaginative uses of shocking images (such as the Black Mass in Huysmans's *Là-Bas* and a dying priest in Benson's *The Light Invisible*), and violence (such as the grisly descriptions of Gilles de Rais's killings in *Là-Bas* or Pazuzu's demonic and blasphemous behavior in *The Exorcist*). Yet, despite their vividity, the concrete images are humbled within a landscape of *agnosis*. *Agnosis* (αγνοσις) can be defined as "unknown existence outside of material knowing."[66] It is a term that counters the idea of *gnosis* (γνῶσις)—that is, certifiable knowledge. In other words, Catholic horror pivots upon the idea that not everything can be fully comprehended by human beings; therefore, the understanding of reality requires humility, reverence, and faith in cooperation with the limited capacities of rationality. Horror's imaginative extremities within the realm of the unknowability can serve the rhetorical dialectics of the fiction. Architectonically, such extreme representations can widen the dialectical poles further apart on the axes. These more capacious axes provide readers with more dialectical space to cognitively grapple with philosophical ideas or meditate on spiritual themes. In other words, extremities found within horror literature stretch the dialectical dynamism of the text. Without such extreme oppositions, the dialectical movement would be restrictive; the art of thinking would not move as dynamically; and by extension, readers' dialectical arena for intellectual exploration would shrink. As a result, less risky fiction would lack provocativeness, tension, or cognitive prowess. As will be outlined throughout the investigation into Catholic horror literature, extreme narrative elements can transcend mere shock appeal and serve thoughtfully rhetorical functions. Fictional extremities help strengthen and widen the dialectical axes, and this move allows for creative freedom, giving room for readers' intellectual imaginations.

Authors' rhetorical use of bristling imagery can naturally make readers uncomfortable. As noted in chapter 1, such affect is a natural part of the horror

genre. In respect to the dialectical nexus, negotiating differences can also be uncomfortable. Much like the anxiety associated with resolving differences and negotiating opposition in our realities outside of fiction, contrasting vantages can be uncomfortable when they are charged with uncertainty and controversy. To manage uncertainty and courageously work through fear requires intellectual tools. Catholic horror fiction often celebrates these tensions and anxieties and invites readers to partake in them. As a result, Catholic horror fiction primarily fosters philosophically engaged audiences. The genre can act as fertile soil allowing readers to plant and grow brave intellectual habits; they embark on dialectical journeys leading to exploration of *agnosis* via the tools of *fides et ratio* found within the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

That said, Catholic horror literature that directs audience attention toward *agnosis* does not aim to persuade viewers about particular beliefs; the genre seeks instead to persuade viewers to *imagine* particular *orientations* that stoke philosophical inquiry. According to philosopher Kendall Walton, orientation differs from belief because orientation can "vary independently" of belief.[67] As such, orientation addresses the "organization, salience, and accessibility of what one believes."[68] Walton illustrates this point with a metaphor. He explains that when a person seeks to travel home from the middle of a forest, it can be much easier to travel home when they are correctly oriented—even when looking at a compass. If they are disoriented, they may still instinctively walk in the wrong direction—again—even when consulting a compass. Walton deduces that beliefs and orientation should optimally cooperate when navigating the world.[69] Along these lines, Catholic horror literature does not tell viewers what to think; rather, it opens them up toward abstract thinking and moves them beyond restrictive concrete thinking. This openness corresponds to Mortimer Adler's claim that dogma suffocates the dialectic process. For the dialectic to unfold in Catholic horror fiction, it cannot announce dogma as an end in itself. Doing so would interfere with philosophical/theological lines of inquiry, the three-dimensional dialectics, and the affective discomfort of the genre. Rather than relying comfortably on known explanations and precepts—as is the case with dogma—writers of Catholic horror literature plunge audiences into unexplained possibilities and *agnosis*, which often involve the supernatural.

As such, audiences' sympathies can evolve. By engaging in the fiction, they can be persuaded to shift their orientations to accommodate agnostic possibilities rather than gnostic certainties. After all, readers may possess sets of beliefs about what humans know and can know—as well as what humans *ought* to know or ought to *strive* to know. Some readers may overlook the epistemological limitations of human beings; other readers may believe that humans should only consider worldly or horizontal issues. Through *agnosis*-driven orientation fueled by rhetorical dialectics, Catholic horror

literature can direct resistant or apathetic audiences toward a different type of orientation. Through the fiction, they can be transported into a metaphysical, or vertical, way of processing their beliefs. From here, they can realize a fresh way to navigate the world.

To this end, Catholic horror literature strengthens the imaginative faculties with rhetorical purpose. As previously mentioned by Lafferty, this strengthening aligns with fiction's capacity to provide possibilities. In Book One of *The Art of Rhetoric*, Aristotle asserts that rhetoric communicates alternative probabilities to others.[70] Supplementarily, imagination allows readers to see, feel, and wear those possibilities through narrative experience. These elements are crucial to calibrating meaningful orientation toward the world. After all, as Walton suggests, "orientation is a matter of imagination, of possessing a certain imaginative picture or map of one's surroundings."[71] Such imagination can affect one's orientation; and by correlating the imagination with reality, people can reorient themselves.[72] Rhetorical imagination acts as an important ingredient. Catholic horror literature does more than correct *gnosis*-centered belief by communicating dogma about *agnosis*; instead, it persuades audiences to internalize and experience orientations that accommodate agnostic possibilities. Familiarizing oneself with the habits of dialectical thinking is crucial to that orientation.

Catholic horror fiction does not provide metaphysical certainty but orients readers' attitudes toward metaphysical wonder through its "architectonic" artistry. As outlined by Richard McKeon, "architectonic" suggests inquiry-forward rhetoric that structures knowledge toward public discovery. McKeon's concept of rhetoric is an "architectonic art" because it stimulates action rather than gathering knowledge; moreover, it focuses on the means of production;[73] and it explores "themes not theses."[74] McKeon's architectonic rhetoric pursues goals similar to those of American pragmatist Richard Rorty, known for his famous objective to "continue the conversation" rather than seeking to pinpoint specific truth.[75] Architectonic arts, such as rhetorical arts, orient and organize thinking across any subject matter. Situationally flexible, rhetoric becomes based on "operative principles by which to reorient and open up actions."[76] These architectonics allow dialectics to cooperate with rhetorical aims—what McKeon calls the "logos of techne."[77] To this end, architectonic rhetoric allows audiences to understand, resonate with, and engage in philosophical inquiry. Artistic compositions, specifically *agnosis*-minded supernatural horror literature, can communicate *agnosis* via rhetorical dialectics; consequently, such works structure particular ways of thinking. They persuade audiences to consider unknowable possibilities that exist outside of human control, and they habituate readers' capacity to achieve this goal by exercising the faculty of imagination.

These *agnosis*-driven orientation and architectonics can foster what Adler celebrates as "dialectical attitudes." As Adler points out, dialectical attitudes are not empirical attitudes nor scientific attitudes. Still, they do not negate scientific values; rather, they provide a different method for discovery.[78] Relying on material data, scientific or empirical investigations can find it difficult to understand philosophical or theological controversies; by contrast, the dialectical mode is much more appropriate to those lines of inquiry. Again, the dialectic does not deliver answers; rather, it engages readers in dialectical openness to help them consider theological and spiritual possibilities. As Adler points out, the dialectic does not seek to close down philosophical possibilities but, rather, seeks to open them up.[79] In its use of dialectic, Catholic horror fiction operates in the same manner. A common misunderstanding in popular American culture is that Catholicism restricts freedom. However, in opposition to scientific or materialistic thinking, dialectical thinking opens people's minds to ponder philosophical wonder and theological curiosity. In other words, dialectical attitudes support intellectual freedom in rejecting the conclusiveness of anything concrete.[80] Therefore, Catholic horror's rhetorical dialectics provide emancipatory structures of thought and foster philosophical habits of mind, inviting readers into a grander tapestry of reality.

NOTES

1. Within literature, the dialectic is used rhetorically. It guides various expressions of meaning and engagement of readers. Therefore, to gesture to the multiplicity of rhetorical expressions, "dialectics" is used rather than the singular "dialectic."

2. Mortimer Adler, *Dialectic* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1927).

3. All of Plato's dialogues exhibit the classical dialectic; however, *Phaedrus* supplies crucial commentary on dialectical process—and what it means to be a dialectician. Kenneth Burke's *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969; originally published in 1945) offers poignant insights about classical dialectics. Richard McKeon's perspectives about classical dialectics are peppered throughout his work, such as his essays "The Future of the Liberal Arts" (*Selected Writings of Richard McKeon, Vol. 2* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005], 273–82) and "Discourse, Demonstration, Verification, and Justification" (*Selected Writings of Richard McKeon, Vol. 2* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005], 157–96).

4. Hegelian dialectics are most clearly displayed in G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977; originally published in 1807). Hegel's dialectics influenced Marx's dialectical materialism (see Karl Marx, *Grundwisse* [New York: Penguin, 1993; originally published in 1857]) and Engels's materialist dialectics (see Friedrich Engels, *Dialectics of Nature* [Moscow: Progress, 1972; originally published in 1883]).

5. Adler, *Dialectic*, 158.
6. Adler, *Dialectic*, 158.
7. Adler, *Dialectic*, 158.
8. Adler, *Dialectic*, 174.
9. Adler, *Dialectic*, 171.
10. Adler, *Dialectic*, 198.
11. Adler, *Dialectic*, 198.
12. Adler, *Dialectic*, 108.
13. Adler, *Dialectic*, 31, 184.
14. Adler, *Dialectic*, 121.
15. Richard Weaver, "Concealed Rhetoric in Scientistic Sociology," in *Language Is Sermonic*, ed. Richard L. Johannesen, Rennard Strickland, and Ralph T. Eubanks (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 145.
16. Weaver, "Concealed Rhetoric," 144–45.
17. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Stephen Scully (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003), 52.
18. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 403.
19. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 403–4.
20. Walter H. Beale, *A Pragmatic Theory of Rhetoric* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987), 68.
21. Ward Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method: A Practitioner's Handbook* (Boston, MA: Godine, 2021), 114.
22. Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method*, 105–6.
23. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 403.
24. Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method*, 131.
25. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 274.
26. George K. Plochmann, *Richard McKeon: A Study* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press), 1990), 124.
27. Plochmann, *Richard McKeon*, 126.
28. Plochmann, *Richard McKeon*, 126.
29. Plochmann, *Richard McKeon*, 126.
30. Plochmann, *Richard McKeon*, 128.
31. Adler, *Dialectic*, 233.
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Chapter 3

Rhetorical Dialectics of J. K. Huysmans's *Là-Bas* (1891)

Like the other horror literature that will be analyzed in this book—that is, the work of Robert Hugh Benson and William Peter Blatty—J. K. Huysmans's 1891 novel *Là-Bas* (*The Damned* or *Down There*)[1] can sometimes be overlooked, especially, as *Catholic* horror literature. It can be neglected for several reasons. First, despite being written more than 130 years ago in France, *Là-Bas* may read as a text that is too dark or pessimistic for religious readers. Unlike Huysmans's other novels, *Là-Bas* addresses the historical realities of Satanism, Black Mass, and occult groups that arose in Europe during this time period. These Satanic trends may offend religious audiences who would rather avoid such dark topics when consulting their consciences.

Religious readers may not be the only demographic to resist *Là-Bas*. From a converse perspective, atheists or secular readers may find the novel to be laughable. Since these audiences may not take the occult seriously or believe in Satanism or the supernatural in general, they may wave away the motivations of the characters in the text. After all, the novel's author—and his characters—both take mysticism seriously, both occult mysticism and Catholic mysticism. Therefore, readers who disbelieve in supernatural elements may not grasp the gravity of Huysmans's claims; consequently, they may deem it as a foolish novel that takes itself too seriously.

However, as this chapter will trace, Huysmans communicates the realism of super-nature in his novel *Là-Bas*. As evidenced throughout his personal letters, the French author wrote the novel to deliberately help public readerships understand the seriousness of supernatural phenomena. *Là-Bas* seems to offer two rhetorical missions: first, to persuade materialists and atheists to consider the existence of the supernatural and, second, to persuade naïve Christians to seriously consider the threat of Satanism continually unfolding in the world. Therefore, resistant readers belonging to either of the camps mentioned above—conservative believers and materialist disbelievers—ultimately

comprise Huysmans's target audiences. His rhetorical dialectics play an important role in his missions. Furthermore, the rhetorical dialectics do not only help resistant readers consider alternative perspectives. They do not only persuade audiences to consider the metaphysical reality of the devil. The novel can also escort uniformed or apathic readers into the ongoing conversation about Satanic and Catholic mysticism. In other words, instead of persuading resistant audiences, the novel can merely guide neutral readers into understanding certain positions and contexts.

Là-Bas offers an intimate novel that is grounded the realities of the times. *Là-Bas* follows a man, Durtal, who is dissatisfied with the material world and hungers for spiritual food. The ongoing tension is wrapped up in this desire. Durtal cannot pinpoint what the spiritual food is, but he knows that it ontologically sits outside of the subjective self. Ultimately, he looks for it in the wrong places: the occult and Satanism. Throughout the novel's external and internal dialogues, he remains ambivalent, positioning himself between two poles of transcendence: mystical Catholicism and modern occult practices.

As a man pulled in two opposing metaphysical directions, the dialectic becomes a tool for Durtal to better understand his spiritual path. It also provides a rhetorical tool allowing Huysmans to guide readers into Durtal's middle space. As this chapter will show, Huysmans implements the rhetorical dialectics not only in an *ad intra* granular manner but also in an *ad extra* macro-level when colliding the novel against the real world. This chapter looks closely at the three dialectical movements found in *Là-Bas*: (1) meta-dialectics between the real world and fictional world, (2) dialectics between spiritual world and material world in the novel itself, and (3) dialectics between good and evil mysticism. Although *Là-Bas* may not be a typical horror narrative, its use of rhetorical dialectics exemplifies how dark fiction can dialectically invite readers to reflect on philosophical and theological realities and entertain Catholic possibilities without merely reciting dogma.

REAL WORLD AND FICTIONAL WORLD

Another group of readers who may be resistant to *La-Bas* are twenty-first-century fans of horror. The novel may not satisfy these readers' expectations because they may categorize *Là-Bas* more generally as dark literary fiction with thinly veiled autobiographical overtones. In short, *Là-Bas* may frustrate "horror-hounds" who view nineteenth-century horror fiction as being in line with other works by Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Machen, Bram Stoker, M. R. James, or Mary Shelley.

Undoubtedly, the novel's storytelling may disappoint readers who expect monsters or suspenseful murder plots. After all, the outward-facing plot

of *Là-Bas* is not particularly dynamic. Its narrative conflict subjectively smolders within the main character rather than being triggered by external physical threats. Specifically, the novel follows Durtal, a character much like Huysmans himself, for Durtal is a published writer who remains dissatisfied with the attitudes circulating in Paris during the late nineteenth century. He is frustrated with the popular trends of naturalism, materialism, and overly democratic thinking. Instead, Durtal yearns for deeper contemplation, transcendental truths, and connection to supernaturalism. He seeks to reach outside of what can be modernly defined as "social constructionist" understandings of truth. But humanity's collective ego is not Durtal's only frustration; he is also frustrated with his own individual ego. Ultimately, as an older man, Durtal does not find worldly or ego-driven lifestyles particularly interesting or satisfying. Therefore, Durtal searches for deeper spiritual meaning in various ways. For example, he has lengthy conversations with friends and acquaintances about Catholicism and supernaturalism. He conducts research on a historical murderer/occultist. Durtal also has sexual relations with a married woman who he claims may be a succubus, and he undertakes a quest to enter a secret Black Mass in Paris. In short, the novel's horror does not unfold from monsters or explicitly diabolical forces. Rather, the novel's horror extends from Durtal's own rational, spiritual, and carnal temptations. As readers are escorted through his curiosities, discomforting avenues appear in the fiction's everyday world. The novel's dread emerges from the possibility that Durtal may find satisfaction in the wrong places, that he may sell his soul to become a Satanist himself.

The novel reads as a text that is intimately subjective, realistic, and even journalistic at times. Stylistically, it combines the psychological realism of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse"[2] with the philosophical leanings of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's 1864 *The Notes from the Underground*[3] and the intellectual eroticism of Søren Kierkegaard's 1843 *The Seducer's Diary*.[4] Still, the novel offers more than a series of meandering philosophical reveries; it dialectically explores arguments about supernatural mysticism while never ascending into the fantastic. The novel speculates about supernaturalism, but it does not explicitly show readers supernatural events or behavior. *Là-Bas* can be categorized as a unique kind of literary horror fiction because it hinges on the topic of supernatural horror without ever showing it in action. The novel builds an atmosphere of dread primarily through its portrayal of Durtal's conversations with others about supernaturalism.

Such a grounded literary approach to dark fiction is unsurprising since Huysmans was a follower of celebrated naturalist writer Émile Zola. In the mid-to-late 1800s, Huysmans reaped success from his early naturalist novels that realistically illustrated French poverty and culture. These novels,

such as *Marthe* (*Martha* [1876]),[5] and *Les Sœurs Vatard* (*The Vatard Sisters* [1879]),[6] earned him praise from Zola. But then around 1884, he shifted his approach away from strict naturalism and wrote his decadent novel *À Rebours* (*Against Nature* [1884]),[7] which remains his most well-known and studied novel. Using his literary reputation and grounded naturalist style, Huysmans deliberately moved "towards a beyond that is different from that of Zola";[8] as part of this movement, he began to gesture to spiritual realities, the occult, and potentially possessed individuals in his novels. He also strongly expressed his interests in Catholic aestheticism and asceticism and eventually converted to Catholicism, spending his final years in a monastery.[9] This "decadent path to Christ" was not unique to Huysmans; other decadent writers such as Oscar Wilde (whose work was influenced by Huysmans's work) and Charles Baudelaire (whose work influenced Huysmans's work) both converted or returned to the Catholic Church.[10]

Là-Bas's perspectives, plot points, and characters are not purely a product of Huysmans's imagination. Various realistic elements fuel *Là-Bas*. For example, Huysmans's personal letters indicate that he believed in Satan and the supernatural influence of Satan on Earth. By consulting other people with insider information and investigating circumstances, he was convinced that Black Masses were regularly held in Paris; therefore, Huysmans was certain that some Parisians dabbled in the occult and others actually worshipped Satan. Since Black Mass is an important plot point in *Là-Bas*, Huysmans journalistically investigated associated occult figures and Satanic gatherings. Still clinging to his naturalist instincts, he deeply researched these trends and figures—and connected them to his novel.[11] For example, the novel's corrupt occultist Catholic priest Canon Docre was loosely based on a corrupt occultist Catholic priest from Belgium, Father Louis Van Haecke, who presumably participated in Black Masses.[12] Also, historical murderer/occultist Gilles de Rais, whom Durtal researches for fun, was an actual historical mass murderer affiliated with the occult.[13] Huysmans researched Gilles de Rais himself as a side project and integrated much of that research into *Là-Bas*.[14] Finally, and most important, Durtal's soul searching is based on Huysmans's own soul searching. Accordingly, some of Durtal's behaviors align with personal events in Huysmans's life—such as Durtal's sensual encounters with a woman who is interested in the occult.[15] Like the character of Durtal, Huysmans was certainly interested in the occult and corresponded with occultists. However, some reports doubt if Huysmans actually attended a Black Mass despite his willingness to do so.[16] Apparently, several of his colleagues maintain that Huysmans invented the experience for the novel. Still, other colleagues confess that Huysmans told them that he had indeed attended

a Black Mass and that he had spotted the infamous Belgian priest, Father Van Haecke, at the ceremony.[17]

Like Robert Hugh Benson, who will be discussed in the next chapter, Huysmans converted to Roman Catholicism. In the meta-dialectic manner, his fictional novels record his real-life personal move toward Catholic conversion. *Là-Bas* is merely one stage in Huysmans's multistage journey into this conversion. The novel reveals his move away from the material world (found in early naturalist novels such as *Marthe* and *Les Sœurs Vatard*) and toward the spiritual world in his later Catholic novels such as *En Route* (1895),[18] *The Cathedral* (1898),[19] and *The Oblate* (1903).[20] These later novels shift away from material details and begin to emphasize metaphysical and aesthetic sentiments. His two middle novels, *À Rebours* (1884) and *Becalmed* (1887),[21] act as bridges between the two literary approaches: materialism/naturalism on the one hand, and spirituality/Catholicism on the other. *À Rebours* and *Becalmed* move away from material-mindedness and toward spiritual mindedness with their emphases on aesthetics and nature, respectively; however, they do not quite illustrate spiritual dimensions. Unlike his previous naturalistic novels, these novels stylistically focus on the natural world to portray characters who do not find meaning in the natural world. Later, Huysmans will fill that void with spiritual purpose in *Là-Bas*, *En Route*, *The Cathedral*, and *The Oblate*.

In his personal correspondence, Huysmans explains that he deliberately contrasts the light with the dark.[22] The more optimistic Catholic texts, such as *En Route*, *The Cathedral*, and *The Oblate*, are meant to simultaneously contrast and complement the darker *Là-Bas*. As such, his catalog of novels works dialectically. In *Là-Bas*, Huysmans illustrates the tempting, despairing, carnal, and worldly perspective, and in his following novels, he opposes such negativity with light, hopeful, aesthetic, and metaphysical perspectives. The settings found in his later novels reveal this juxtaposition. Whereas scenes in *Là-Bas* are set throughout locations in Paris, his three later novels are primarily set in monasteries, churches, and cathedrals away from Paris. According to his personal correspondence, Huysmans purposely facilitated this overall juxtaposition between *Là-Bas* and his other novels. He claimed that he wanted to help the public understand the existence of the devil by publishing *Là-Bas*. About the novel, he specifically writes, "it is a case of trying to get them to accept God" and "try[ing] to interest them in believing in Our Lord."[23] Through his later catalog of novels, he facilitates a dialectic with *Là-Bas*. He provides a literary arena for readers to engage in a back-and-forth between two positions: one that explores incomplete meaning through the devil and one that finds full meaning through God. On a macro-level, *Là-Bas* emphasizes the darker of the positions; readers must read his series of five or six books to fully participate in this wider dialectical movement between dark and light.

In his personal correspondence in 1894/1895, Huysmans admits that he had "managed to evoke the spectre of the Devil in *Là-Bas*" for the reading public.[24] He adds that he also made the "Parisian reading public swallow the devil in *Là-Bas*."[25] Therefore, it is clear that Huysmans sought to persuade audiences that Satanism exists in the world. In a personal letter in 1892, Huysmans writes, "the more I advance, the more proof I get that the Middle Ages were right in what they said about Satanism. *Là-Bas* is an understatement of the true situation."[26] In other words, in the late 1800s, Huysmans maintains that Satanism is not the product of popular media frenzy as it was in the Burning Times of the 1500s and 1600s. Rather, he views it as a tradition of dark mysticism with an enduring legacy that continued to attract people during his time. For example, Huysmans confesses that he based his Satanist Catholic priest character, Canon Docre, on the "Canon of the Most Precious Blood" (that is, Father Louis Van Haecke[27]), adding that the real priest was "much worse" than his fictional character.[28] He bases his conviction about Satanism on his journalistic investigations. He admits that he was sent documents about Satanism by a sacrilegious priest from Lyons who invoked succubae as proof of the existence of dark rites.[29] In respect to another clergyman, who offered him information, Huysmans says that he was also given "the strangest of documents" from "the last exorcist to be in possession of the secrets from the Middle Ages."[30] His research was also informed by personal experience including his own brief involvement in the occult, as previously mentioned. Therefore, Huysmans made it paramount to base his fiction on real documents, circumstances, events, people, and perspectives.

Developed from his journalistic research, Huysmans's novel volleys between real world references (people, events, places) and fiction. As such, Adler's metaphysical dialectic between possibility and actuality[31] becomes evident in *Là-Bas*. As this chapter will outline, *Là-Bas* houses dialectic movement between positions within the novel itself, but the novel also orchestrates a dialectic between the world of discourse and the real world. Huysmans's journalistic approach to the content of the novel—and its style—spotlights such macro-level dialectic. And this movement is crucial to the meaning of the piece and Huysmans's rhetorical purpose. After all, to convince the public that the devil exists and that he should be avoided, the fiction needs to clearly connect to the real world.

Although *Là-Bas* may align with Adler's metaphysical dialectic, it does not seem to align with Lafferty's dialectical understanding of "Science Fiction."[32] While the novel does not merely offer straightforward journalistic prose about the dangers of the occult, it seems to wear a "mask that resembles the face underneath the mask," to use Lafferty's analogy. As a rhetoric, the novel may read as too realistic to craft a "masquerade" or "parable" of the World. In short, Huysmans's *Là-Bas* aligns with much of the "mainstream

fiction" that Lafferty criticizes, but Huysmans is certainly self-conscious about his realistic approach. In all his novels, he writes "naturalistically" for wider readerships. That said, *Là-Bas* demonstrates that a horror novel may not have to fulfill Lafferty's criteria of "Science Fiction" to spark the atmosphere of dread that is so important to supernatural horror. Remarkably, Huysmans crafts atmosphere and wonder primarily through dialectical conversations and social interactions. As shown in later works of Catholic horror fiction (Benson's and Blatty's), explicit connections to realism are an important element of Catholic storytelling—and Catholic horror. In addition to provoking an affect of fear, the genre communicates Catholicism's solemn insistence on objective reality by meditating on the True, Good, and Beautiful rather than on magic or flights of fancy.

DIALOGUE IN *LÀ-BAS*

The novel's rhetoric primarily extends through the middle position of Durtal, whom readers follow through every scene of *Là-Bas*. The character acts as a connective thread of the composition, establishing both an autobiographical link to Huysmans himself and a rhetorical link for audience identification. Because readers become intimately acquainted with Durtal by immersing into his subjectivity, he acts as a vehicle enabling audiences to enter several dialectical layers within the novel itself. Both Durtal's inner meditations and external dialogues rhetorically guide readers into the novel's dialectical dynamism.

Like Plato, Huysmans crafts character-driven dialogues to incarnate philosophical and theological dialectical discussions. Although Plato is not referenced in *Là-Bas* or explicitly mentioned in Huysmans's personal letters, Huysmans seems to heavily borrow from Plato's metaphysical outlook and literary style. Like all Catholic mysticism, Huysmans's mysticism clearly favors the Platonic realm of the Forms over worldly imitation. However, unlike Plato's fully philosophical approach, Huysmans's novel realistically represents a man's active struggle to connect with the metaphysical realm. Rather than approaching the topic from a philosophical angle, Huysmans's narrative personalizes a man's day-to-day struggle. Therefore, in *Là-Bas* (and Huysmans's three subsequent novels), Durtal acts like a man who has recently broken free of his chains in Plato's Allegory of the Cave (*Republic*, 514a–520a).[33] As such, he frustratedly explores the inside of the allegorical cave and converses with others who have also broken free. Some of these characters have never left the cave, such as the learned Des Hermies and Gévingey, while others such as the Catholic character Carhaix have left the cave and returned as Plato's allegory specifies. In short, much of the novel

illustrates dialogic interactions between quasi-enlightened and more fully enlightened characters.

Much like Plato, Huysmans uses dialectical dialogue as a crucial narrative device. *Là-Bas*'s external dialogues—specifically between Des Hermies and Durtal—can double as internal dialogues as well since these two characters represent one personality—that is, Huysmans himself. The personal search for transcendent understanding is represented through the two conversing characters. The conversations between Des Hermies and Durtal resemble a dialectical approach seen throughout the medieval philosophical tradition in works such as Augustine's early *Soliloquies* where Augustine converses with Reason[34] and Anselm of Canterbury's dialogues between Teacher and Student.[35] Des Hermies generally acts as the more informed Reason or the Teacher while Durtal acts as the less informed student character, albeit with opinions of his own.

Outside of the Middle Ages, this approach between Des Hermies and Durtal closely resembles Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Rousseau juge de Jean-Jacques* (*Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques* [1776]),[36] which presents three dialogues between a "Frenchman" and "Rousseau" wherein they argue the merits and errors of a third character, "Jean-Jacques." Rousseau wrote this work to respond to his critics and preserve his reputation. In it, Rousseau splits his personality into different characters to reveal a more objective stance and insulate himself against bias.[37] Similarly, Huysmans uses his split characters, Durtal and Des Hermies, to robustly explore complex topics.

Like Rousseau's self-centered dialogues, Huysmans divides himself into two fictional characters to depict his own conflicting attitudes; but unlike Rousseau, he is less concerned about righting his reputation. In fact, by writing *Là-Bas*, Huysmans complicates his reputation. Like Socrates in Plato's dialogues, Huysmans shows that the pursuit of truth is more important than conforming to conventions of etiquette and societal expectations.[38] Similarly, Huysmans and his characters are not ashamed by their discussions of the supernatural and occult. This lack of shame communicates a sincere pursuit of truth, suggesting that the fiction should be taken seriously as more than mere entertainment. As Hösle suggests, shame and etiquette can problematically interfere with "being forthright" in a philosophical discussion.[39] The forthright tone of *Là-Bas* is important given the novel's insistence that serious discussions of religion and mysticism were in decline at the time. This trend frustrates characters in the novel—and clearly frustrates Huysmans himself.

Moreover, the Catholic Church's position on the supernatural was frustrating to spiritual seekers: characters in the novel and Huysmans himself. As voiced by *Là-Bas*'s learned astrologist Gévingey in his conversation with Durtal and Des Hermies, the work of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Bonaventure, and Pope Innocent VIII all doctrinally establish that the church

believes in the existence of the devil and incubi/succubi.[40] But, as Gévingey notes, the church remains curiously silent about these evil influences, active occultists, and the role of Satanism in criminal behavior. With *Là-Bas*, Huysmans seems driven to remedy this silence—but not without a price. As Huysmans notes throughout his personal correspondence, *Là-Bas*'s discussions about taboo supernatural topics made Huysmans appear "mad," especially to those of the naturalist school and Émile Zola's followers.[41] Moreover, the book's topics—specifically the Black Mass scene—were scandalous in their own way. Although the novel was successful in France, it took more than thirty years to be translated and published for British/American markets, and some editions had been censored.[42] Huysmans confidently sought to convey spiritual naturalism in *Là-Bas*, and as his letters reveal, he did not seem to care if his reputation suffered because of it.

As part of his commitment to the truth, Huysmans's *Là-Bas* features (quite literal) "devil's advocates" throughout its dialectical dialogues. Using devil's advocates, he does not shut down dialectical investigation by only providing Catholic viewpoints. Instead, he traces the Satanic and occultist perspectives alongside the Catholic mystical perspectives. He illustrates a range of positions. Readers hear from blaspheming Catholics (Mme Chantelouve and Cardinal Docre), learned astrologists (Gévingey), devout Catholics (Carhaix), and neutral aesthetes (Des Hermies and Durtal). Through Durtal's individual research of Gilles de Rais, readers also learn about the motives and actions of a historical mass murderer and the man's complex relationship with the Catholic Church. Although Gilles de Rais is not an active character who engages in the dialogues, Durtal's comprehensive profile of the historical figure provides another example of a Satanist figure who eventually repents and is mercifully forgiven by the Catholic Church.

In sum, these multiple perspectives allow defenses of what Vittorio Hösle calls "conceivable possibilities" incited through the imagination.[43] Such conceivable possibilities include devil's advocates who potentially defend positions that the author may not be believe are true.[44] Devil's advocates test pressure points of arguments through imaginative possibilities. They allow readers to rationally participate in such testing, and the dialectical structure provides the fitting intellectual architecture to facilitate such testing. Yet, *Là-Bas* does not merely construct one basic binary; instead, Huysmans employs a matrix of perspectives to develop multiple dialogues with differing shades of nuanced perspectives. In fact, several of these dialogues involve three or four characters rather than two.

In this way, much of *Là-Bas* works in a *via negativa* fashion. Unlike his later more overtly Catholic novels, *Là-Bas* is often concerned with establishing what is not true and not good. Fueled by dialectical interaction with devil's advocates, the novel eliminates certain conceivable possibilities as true,

good, or beautiful, so that readers are directed to the *authentically* good, true, and beautiful—even if they do not ultimately have a full understanding of what these are. To this end, *Là-Bas* illustrates a process of spiritual refinement and correction, enabling individuals to overcome materialism and move past misguided supernaturalism. In a way, then, the novel acts as the first leg of a transformative journey; it does not provide closure through direct answers and resolution. The text establishes the ongoing process of refinement rather than arriving at a definitive resting point. Aligning with Adler's definition of dialectics, the novel acts as a continuous spiritual and intellectual journey that moves through opposing possibilities. The fiction itself acts as an imaginative vehicle to rhetorically incite audience participation in dialectic thinking about mysticism.

In the spirit of authentic dialectics, Huysmans does not resolve the discussion in *Là-Bas*; however, he does indicate Durtal's shifting attitudes and orientation. After Durtal runs out of the Black Mass because he does not find it spiritually satisfying, he distances himself from carnal appetites. Durtal moves in this direction, but he never commits to a definitive position. In fact, even at the end of the novel, he admits that he is still scared to embrace faith and Catholicism. Yet this perspective should not be taken as an indication of Huysmans's position on faith and Catholicism. Rather, Durtal's ambivalence works rhetorically. Much like Hösle explains, "victory of a position at the end of a dialogue is generally—but not always—an indication that its author considered this position the right one"; specifically, "dialogue [that] ends in an aporia does not mean . . . that its author was not clear about the question concerned or at least thought he was not."[45] Hösle suggests that effective philosophical dialogues maintain "respect for the reader's autonomy" because readers are meant to "react to the reading by examining the quality of the arguments exchanged."[46] Such openness to arguments and respect for readers' autonomy is crucial to well-received Catholic horror since the fiction does not preach to readers but, instead, escorts them into a dialectical philosophical framework that allows for Catholic possibilities of mysticism, faith, and the supernatural. *Là-Bas* exemplifies this type of rhetorical guidance.

But of course, respect for the autonomy of readers is not without its challenges. Some of Huysmans's readers have misinterpreted the dialogic direction of the novel, misreading the devil's advocate positions as true and good. In a way, such readers have mistaken the turbulent ocean as a stable shore. For example, in his letters, Huysmans expresses disappointment that some readers asked him to bring them to Black Masses after reading his novel;[47] these readers did not understand that even an open-minded character like Durtal finds the Black Mass repulsive and immediately leaves the ceremony despite his desire to discover spiritual satisfaction. As rhetoricians like

Aristotle, Plato, and others repeatedly make clear, rhetoric is an art and not an exact science. Huysmans moves readers toward particular positions through the arts of rhetoric, dialectic, and literature. Unlike propaganda, these arts respect the autonomy and intelligence of audiences. Like all literary rhetoric, *Là-Bas* explores possibilities and probabilities, not merely scientific facts, and therein lies the potential for both interpretation and misinterpretation.

SPIRITUAL REALISM AND ART

Throughout *Là-Bas*, Durtal dialogues with Des Hermies, engaging in conversations that, as scholars point out, can be interpreted as Huysmans dialoguing with himself.[48] Unlike other horror stories with split personalities—like Poe's "William Wilson" or Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*—Des Hermies is not a psychological foil of Durtal. Rather, the two characters compatibly interact. Des Hermies provides a wiser and broader perspective while Durtal seems more driven by personal passions. In their external dialogues, Des Hermies acts as a stable guide who does not provide answers but directs Durtal toward particular perspectives. *Là-Bas* pivots upon these conversations with Des Hermies, and in this way, it differs from *En Route*, Huysmans's subsequent novel, which relies on Durtal's inner meditations and does not feature Des Hermies. The dialogues in *Là-Bas* allow readers to better understand Durtal's conflicted perspectives about art, mysticism, and the world around him. These conversations help readers understand the primary tension of the novel.

Là-Bas begins by illustrating the tension *in medias res*. In the first chapter, Des Hermies argues with Durtal against the aesthetic philosophy of naturalism. Via this conversation, Huysmans indirectly proclaims that *Là-Bas* will differ from his previous naturalistic novels, specifically in its openness toward spirituality. More precisely, he establishes the disputed question of naturalism[49] as a controversy to be explored through the novel's dialectical interactions.

In this beginning dialogue, Durtal sees the reasonableness of Des Hermies's perspectives against naturalism. Des Hermies suggests that naturalism acts as an overly democratic enterprise that has "turned literature into the living incarnation of materialism"; it acts as a "catch-all" of constitutional dispositions" and blames everything, including spiritual problems, on "appetites and instincts" or "sex and insanity."[50] Des Hermies explains that naturalism encourages the "intrusion of positivism into Art" akin to material found in newspapers; as such, it is "base and disgusting."[51] Des Hermies is left with a "feeling of amazement that a man can write three to four hundred pages without having anything whatsoever to say."[52] Based on Des Hermies's argument,

Durtal begins to agree that materialism is problematic.[53] Des Hermies's arguments persuade Durtal to reconsider his position about the value of naturalistic art. After Des Hermies leaves, Durtal contemplates the deficiencies of naturalism—that is, its tendency to explain away "life's mysteries in terms of the sickness of the senses"—while still admitting its potential benefits.[54]

In making such an admission, Durtal teases out a position that is explored throughout the novel, a position that Huysmans mirrors throughout the novel's literary approach itself: spiritual realism or spiritual naturalism. Durtal notes that spiritual realism can preserve the "rich sinewy language of realism" while also "sink[ing] a shaft into the soul."[55] As such, it balances body with the soul, for the realistic literary style accommodates the body while the spiritual substance nourishes the soul. As Durtal ponders the categorical benefits of spiritual realism in this first chapter, Huysmans seems to announce the literary approach implemented in *Là-Bas* as well. Through this early external dialogue with Des Hermies and Durtal's own inner meditation, Huysmans reveals a shift in his approach from earlier naturalistic novels, one that preserves shades of journalistic methods while also exploring metaphysical truth through fiction.

From here, Durtal contemplates effective spiritual naturalism in art. Although he recognizes that Dostoyevsky's work provides a compelling example, he finds a more illustrative example in the Christian paintings of Matthias Grünewald. Durtal describes the naturalism of the painting: he discusses how it meticulously accounts for the details of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ while also capturing the reality that the "crucified corpse was truly that of a God" appearing in "his celestial Super-essence" despite the tortuous details.[56] Durtal notes the space between naturalism and idealism; he also notes the space between the vulgar sensory and the transcendent beautiful: "As a masterpiece of the impossible," the art illustrates "invisible and the tangible" to "make sublime the infinite distress of the soul" which is "at one and at the same time totally out of reach yet entirely of the earth."[57] Ultimately, through Grünewald's art, Durtal contemplates the dialectic between what the Roman Catholic Nicene Creed distinguishes as the "visible and invisible." More philosophically, this tension can also be understood as interplay between being and Being—or, in the Kierkegaardian sense, the tension between the aesthetic stage and the religious stage.[58] As shown through Durtal's analysis of Grünewald, art itself can make room for dialectical movement between spirituality and naturalism. The job of the aesthete, a role that Durtal assumes, is to dwell in that dialectical space. Via *Là-Bas*, Huysmans fosters that very same aesthetic relocation of his readers. His novel rhetorically places readers into this dialectical spiritual-realistic space. The act of transporting the reader into this dialectical movement between visible and invisible stands out as a crucial rhetorical ingredient within the novel.

Throughout the novel, Durtal repeatedly admits that he is attracted to the ethos of the Middle Ages. And once he outlines spiritual naturalism, the attraction seems warranted. After all, the Middle Ages was not only the pinnacle of Christian mysticism but also a time that sought to better understand the material world in connection with mystical reality via the Scholastic mission. In reverence of the Scholastic tradition, Durtal contemplates a disputed question that drives much of the novel: should he truly embrace "mystic Naturalism" and embrace the "Catholicism of the Middle Ages"?[59] He admits that it seems "absurd," but at the same time, he asks, "why not?"[60] These lines of inquiry fuel the dialectical movement explored throughout the entire novel—sometimes through external dialogues with other characters (the medieval genre of *disputatio*)—or sometimes through inner meditations (the medieval genre of *meditatio*). The beginning of *Là-Bas* showcases both of these approaches, which are indebted to the Middle Ages. The novel's opening interaction between Durtal and Des Hermies features an external dialectical conversation that concludes with Durtal's own internal meditations about spirituality and art. Both modes of discourse help Durtal wrestle with the truth and prompt him to consider how he should orient himself in respect to that truth. Rhetorically, both outer dialogues and inner meditations also help readers grapple with the truth in dynamic ways—that is, both subjectively and objectively—albeit through the third-person point of view limited to Durtal.

COUNTERING MAGICAL REALISM

Durtal's spiritual realism may call to mind the popular term "magical realism." Despite some overlaps with magical realism, spiritual realism largely contrasts magical realism. In examining these overlaps and differences, Huysmans's/Durtal's spiritual realism can be envisioned more precisely in respect to the novel's rhetorical dialectics.

Magical realism was first defined by Franz Roh in his 1925 essay "Magical Realism: Post-expressionism." In it, he defines magical realism as a way of fleshing out the spiritual essence to help clarify objects in the world.[61] The genre acts as a middle ground between the two opposing forces: the magical world of dreams and the world of reality.[62] In the term "magical realism," "magical" concerns the world of ideals, contemplation, and knowing, while "realism" concerns the world of sensuality, action, and worldly progression.[63] In the history of ideas, this places magical realism in the middle of the *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa* spectrum.

It may seem that Huysmans's spiritual naturalism aligns with magical realism because Durtal stands at the middle of transcendent and world, but Huysmans's spiritual naturalism does not offer an equal split as seen in

magical realism. In fact, spiritual naturalism privileges spirituality as more ontologically transcendent and permanent than changeable material existence.

As already established, Durtal resembles a Platonist, for he privileges essence over existence. Naturally, Durtal relates to the Middle Ages because the era privileges Platonic idealism. Ultimately, this idealism marks the crucial difference between magical realism and spiritual realism. Roh clarifies that magical-realists were neither the practical "Machiavellian politician nor the apolitical man who listens only to the voice of an ethical ideal"; instead, magic-realists are "at once political and ethical."[64] Durtal, on the other hand, is essentially apolitical. In fact, he is discouraged not only by the futility of politics but also by worldly progress in general. Toward the end of *Là-Bas*, Durtal remarks that all around him he sees "the triumph of those without ability and without scruples, the apotheosis of crooked politicians and financiers."[65] He doubts that progress can be made on Earth because "Progress is the hypocrisy in which vice is refined!"[66] He claims that worldly "progress" merely changes the nature of the sins made and does not fight against them,[67]and that progress has become more destructive than constructive.[68] Unimpressed with modern-day advancements, Durtal appreciates the conservation of transcendental essences rather than the deceptive appearance of worldly development.

However, Durtal and Roh share an understanding that the term "magic" significantly differs from "mystic."[69] Unlike the phenomenological view that fuels much magical realism, Durtal's spiritual realism is ontological. Disinterested in magical worlds of magical realism, Durtal seeks to commune with the one transcendent dimension—what Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar calls the perpetually unfolding "Theo-drama."[70] Such a "Theo-drama" is not phenomenologically, socially, or culturally constructed. Nor does it rely on human beings—even though human beings participate as players in it. Ultimately, spiritual naturalism is more vertically minded than magical realism; as such, it does not accommodate postcolonialism or cultural relativism in the way that magical realism has in the last forty years. In this way, mysticism offers a grander scheme and transcends magic; as such, it can provoke more contemplative terror because mysticism extends beyond the limits of human epistemology and unfolds outside of human control.

In an 1891 letter, Huysmans himself explains this vertical attitude found in *Là-Bas*. He writes that mysticism is "the art of Catholicism."[71] He states that, in mysticism, one confronts "extraordinary things about reality and life, frightening states of the soul, battles that the profane have no idea of," specifically Satanism, which *Là-Bas* presents with "documentary veracity."[72] But his type of "veracity" substantially differs from his early work.[73] Huysmans's naturalism is no longer bound to the material world; as such, it becomes a

"supernaturalism," which he proclaims in 1890 to be the "only great and true art."[74]

Huysmans clearly recognizes that supernaturalism—specifically, mysticism—can be frightening. The history of Catholic mysticism supports this perspective as evidenced by Angela of Foligno's graphic visions of drinking blood from the wound in Jesus's side,[75] John of the Cross's "the dark night of the soul,"[76] or the expressions of ineffability in *The Cloud of Unknowing*.[77] The unknowability of mysticism and its accompanying fear have been explored by contemporary philosopher Eugene Thacker in his *In the Dust of the Planet*. He labels this contemplative fear as the "horror of philosophy," which gives voice to the horror found in Catholic mysticism,[78] the same horror recognized by Huysmans in *Là-Bas*. Pondering *agnosis*, nonknowability, or what Thacker calls "the world without us," can be terrifying, and Roman Catholic mysticism ponders these questions. Catholicism invites such deep contemplation, but unlike the nihilistic/pessimistic perspective forwarded by Thacker, its mystical modes make it possible to find meaning in *Logos* and God's love. In a conversation with Des Hermies, Durtal acutely observes a "thin dividing line" between dark mysticism and Catholic mysticism.[79] *Là-Bas* is ultimately a novel about that thin dividing line—and the novel's dialectics unfold between both sides of that line.

Throughout *Là-Bas*, Durtal faces the pessimistic attitude on one side of that line. He stands on the precipice of adhering to a dark mysticism that does not accommodate love and hope but, instead, embraces death and despair. As the novel unfolds, readers find that he becomes more receptive to spiritual realism, even entertaining Catholic attitudes to a slight degree. But at the end of the novel, Durtal remains disgruntled and frustrated; he still refuses to fully embrace Catholic mysticism. The dialectic continues at the end of the novel, a move that aligns with Mortimer Alder's argument that perpetuity is a defining characteristic of the dialectic. The contrasting dimensions of spiritual realism allow for the ongoing nature of dialectical exchange. These make it possible for Durtal to keep engaging in the dialectic—and for readers to rhetorically participate in the dialectic after they finish the novel.

PURSUIT OF TRUTH

Durtal is attracted to the Black Mass because he acknowledges that truth is found in the category of the mystical; however, he struggles to correctly discern the *type* of mysticism that contains the truth. While Catholicism is the path that Durtal inevitably pursues in Huysmans's subsequent novels, *En Route*, *The Cathedral*, and *The Oblate*, he decides to explore Satanism before he explores Catholicism. Functioning as Durtal's conscience, Des Hermies

issues a caution to Durtal before he attends the Black Mass: "The affiliates of Satanism," he says, "are mystics of a vile order, but they are mystics."[80] Des Hermies explains that the cult of Satanism is no more "insane" than the cult of God. He then qualifies his claims by saying that the "only difference" is that "one is rotten and the other is resplendent."[81] Therefore, Satanism and Christianity share a mystical genus but differ in species. As such, they merge and also divide, exhibiting two characteristics of dialectical exchange. Durtal already recognizes that point when, during his research of Gilles, he comments to himself: "whether they are aware of their condition or not," those "who do evil for the sake of evil" are "no madder than the contemplative monk praying in his cell or the public benefactor sitting in his office [. . .] it is just that these people are at opposite spiritual poles to one another."[82] Des Hermies and Durtal's stance is triangulated by Gévingey, the expert astrologer, who says, "There are only two cities, you see, the City of God and the City of the Devil."[83] He explains that while the spiritualists and occultists seem to occupy a middle position, they in fact "Satanize everything, whether they know it or not."[84] Therefore, the dark and light share a general mystic mode of contemplation but exist on opposite poles of the mystic spectrum.

The middle of that spectrum is worth noting since Durtal (and, rhetorically, the reader) dwells in that space. As Durtal explains to Des Hermies when discussing the strange circumstances of Gilles de Rais, "between exalted mysticism and the most cynical Satanism there is but a thin dividing line. All points meet at infinity."[85] Such an infinity is the infinite ongoing nature of the dialectic. It does not synthesize itself finitely in the middle but naturally unfolds infinitely while maintaining the opposite positions. Des Hermies recognizes this interspace in trying to understand why Gilles de Rais became a murderer. Here, Durtal hesitantly agrees that it is "one extreme or the other." He further explains that, "given the obstacles to becoming a saint, the only thing open to [Gilles de Rais] was to become a fiend," which involves "abhorrence of impotency" and "a hatred of mediocrity."[86] Both Durtal and Des Hermies find Gilles de Rias fascinating because he incarnates dialectical action. He moves from one extreme to the other without embracing a compromised synthesis. Gilles falls away from Christian piety into Satanism and then finally returns to Christian piety. Durtal and Des Hermies are fascinated with this oscillation of extremes and see this movement as a mystic mode of adherence. In *Là-Bas*, Durtal mirrors the spirit of this oscillation in his investigations and curiosities, albeit to a less sensational degree than Gilles. Attitudinally, Durtal teeters between one extreme and the other: Satanism and Catholicism. Based on the dialectical movement, if he does not become a Satanist, he will need to move toward piety. Like Schrödinger's cat, the dialectical point of infinity is outside of the box; opening the box reveals two oppositions, for both cannot be true simultaneously.

Là-Bas is a novel that counters everyday mediocrity. By resisting this stasis through dialectical dynamism, the text rhetorically invites readers into its oscillating arguments. In a rare optimistic moment in *Là-Bas*, Durtal admits that their discussion about the supernatural and the church is a "much better topic of conversation than politics or horse-racing."[87] He also insists that "the only people who are worth knowing are either saints, scoundrels, or madmen; at least their conversation is always interesting" whereas "sensible people are dull by definition."[88] When conversation becomes consensus, it does not stretch the intellectual imagination in a spirited dialectical manner. In these circumstances, as Durtal insinuates, conversation becomes "harping on about the same boring tune about everyday life."[89] Uninteresting to Durtal, such dialogue does not quest toward more resplendent truths via faith and reason. In its everyday stasis, it does not demand dialectical dynamism. Rather, as Durtal notes, it is a commonplace trait of the "crowd," and he is "sick of it."[90]

In contrast to the disinteresting mundane, Durtal primarily engages "people worth knowing"—that is, the aforementioned "saints, scoundrels, and madmen." The saints are represented by Carhaix and his wife Mme Carhaix; the saint-scoundrel is represented by Canon Docre, and madmen-scoundrels are represented by Mme Chantelouve and, more distantly, Gilles de Rais. Durtal floats within that trifecta. He is not a saint; he is not quite a scoundrel, nor is he fully mad. And through the main character of Durtal, Huysmans places readers into a similar noncommittal position in the middle of the *trivium* as well. As such, readers find themselves in the middle of a dialectical and dynamic exchange of conceivable possibilities.

Much of *Là-Bas* encompasses this interspace. Similar to Zahava K. McKeon's discussion of the rhetorical middle ground offered by the dialectic, *Là-Bas* shows how that middle position operates. After all, *Là-Bas* largely neglects a proper beginning and instead plunges into the middle position—or the rhetorical dialectics themselves. The novel begins with Durtal's chapter 1 admission that he was "unable to steel his soul to make the jump" into Catholic conversion despite appreciating Catholicism's supernaturalism.[91] And by the end, Durtal admits that he is still "unable to swallow" the dogmas of Christianity.[92] Huysmans still offers no resolution of this primary and initial issue in *Là-Bas*; instead, this novel reads as the middle of a novel for it lacks the narrative features of rising action, falling action, and resolution. The narrative structure is dialectical in the classical sense; much like Plato's dialogues, the plot points seem to be secondary while the dialogues themselves are in the spotlight.

All the while, Carhaix, the devout Catholic character, contrasts the noncommittal Durtal. Despite the stricken world, he embraces an eventual resolution through a future "coming of Christ" to reboot civilization and purify

such despicable worldly conditions. Unconvinced, Durtal responds: "I hope for nothing. [. . .] I believe that, alas, heaven watches over this exhausted planet blindly."[93] In his despair, Durtal has no peace, but he knows that faith is a solution. He admits that he envies Carhaix's faith, recognizes the existence of the supernatural, and knows that both he and Des Hermies "can't sit on the fence forever" and must pick a side.[94] Des Hermies, however, is closer to finding peace than Durtal when he says that "there are moments" where he feels that he is "almost there" in faithful belief and recognizes that faith is "the only haven in which a rudderless man can find peace."[95] Like the middle-ness of the novel structure itself, Durtal perpetuates the dialectical spirit of the novel by never fully committing to a position, despite ultimately knowing which position to take.

While plot is less significant in *Là-Bas*, the characters take center stage. After all, the characters drive the dialogues that compose much of the novel. Huysmans explores dialectical relations among diverse types of characters—and character personalities. Durtal importantly recognizes the trifold natures of two "scoundrels" who fascinate him, and he splits them up respectively. He first does so when describing the complex nature of Mme Chantelouve, the woman who is fascinated with him and with whom he has sexual relations. First, he explains that Mme Chantelouve wears three personalities: first, she is the reserved aristocratic woman; second, she is the "sexually predatory woman" and "mud-spitting harlot, entirely without shame" who is transformed from the first state; and third, she is that of a "merciless vixen, a thoroughgoing Satanist."[96] Each stage of Mme Chantelouve's behavior relates to the three Platonic dimensions.[97] The first dimension concerns sensory relation to artifacts outside of the self, the second dimension concerns spirits or morals and self, and the third dimension concerns mystical truths that extend above the sensory world and the self. These also respectively correspond to the transcendentals: worldly beauty, moral goodness, and spiritual truth. Clearly, Mme Chantelouve inverts each of these transcendentals, and this inversion supports Durtal's diagnosis that Mme Chantelouve is diabolical.

The inverted natures of Mme Chantelouve are also mirrored in Gilles de Rais, another figure who aligns with Satanism. According to Durtal's research, Gilles's first personality was that of a courageous soldier, his second was that of a "refined and artistic criminal," and the third was that of a Satanic and dark mystic (albeit eventually repentant) sinner.[98] Again, the first personality connects to the occupational world, the second concerns his morals (and lack thereof), and the third concerns essences that transcend the self and the physical world.

As a man with tenuous ties to each of these figures, Durtal noncommittedly floats between these two mysterious characters and their trifold sensory, moral, and mystical personalities. Moreover, by interacting with the

three personalities of both figures, Durtal contemplates both good and evil. Throughout the novel, he intimately gets to know Mme Chantelouve only to reject her, and in the process, he rejects her inverted personalities and the Black Mass itself.[99] He becomes obsessed with learning about Gilles de Rais's sinful life but soon discovers that Gilles repented for his sins and was forgiven by the Catholic Church. Gilles de Rais's life actually documents an inversion of the Good that self-corrects back toward the good. In short, by interacting with these two "scoundrel" characters, Durtal better understands the Good through his dialectical engagement of negating the negation of the Good. As such, the novel's depiction of evil is not an end in itself, but a means of communicating why and how evil can be negated.

Durtal does not convert to Catholicism in *Là-Bas*, but he shifts his orientation toward mysticism. Despite his curiosity about the dark arts, he eventually resists Satanist mysticism; at the same time, he never fully commits to Christian mysticism. After his experiences with Mme Chantelouve, he becomes more repulsed by erotic love and his carnal appetites;[100] he recognizes that sexuality is an obstacle rather than an end in itself.[101] Therefore, he becomes thrilled by chastity since it holds "timeless charm" and promises of "pure and unsullied love far removed from the bedroom."[102] In short, the dialectic between good and evil—which is refined through conversation, research, and firsthand experience—develops his understanding and moves his will. Soul searching options become more focused. Through reasoning and experience, he recognizes that satisfaction is not found in the flesh or the occult. Rather, satisfaction is found by denying them and transcending them. The novel documents how Durtal comes to understand this denial before he can willfully apply the denial. In a way, the novel works in a similar manner. In *Là-Bas*, Huysmans helps readers both to know the nature of evil (through characters' dialogues) and to confront evil acts and attitudes (through reading particular fictional plot points) before they can deny what is evil and embrace the good.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Là-Bas is an important contribution to the rhetorical dialectics at work within Catholic horror fiction—and Catholic fiction in general. *Là-Bas* illustrates a deep subjective struggle between temptation and piety in the horror genre. Such a degree of intimacy is seldom seen in earlier horror writing from the proto-horror poetry of Dante's *Inferno* to the works of Gothic writers. Instead, Huysmans's novel uniquely collides elements of Romanticism and existentialism with Catholic mysticism. The novel juxtaposes the love of aesthetics and exploration of the sublime (Romanticism) with the gritty human realities

of struggling with existence—and sets the juxtaposition upon a cosmopolitan backdrop—to illustrate how Catholic attitudes unfold in the world.

The novel does not make use of resplendent Catholic imagery or inspiring locations, which are seen in Huysmans's later *En Route*, *The Cathedral*, and *The Oblate*. Instead, *Là-Bas* displays the sickness of being misled within everyday cosmopolitan environments—and its according seduction. The last lines of the novel make this clear. It does not end with positive celebration of revelation and simple enlightenment. Ultimately, Huysmans communicates that Catholic conversion requires suffering and a patient turning of the soul to God. Such turning involves thoughtful disputation, meditation, and discernment. Instead of highlighting how the light pierces the darkness, Huysmans illustrates the darkness in itself so that readers can better understand and situate their own commitment to the Good, True, and Beautiful.

This dynamic is revealed with particular acuteness in the novel's last line, which offers Durtal's response to Des Hermies. After he affirms that the "dawn is light," Durtal also despairs of the material world explaining, "this century does not give a fig for the coming glory of Christ; it adulterates the supernatural and vomits over the other-worldly."[103] He additionally expresses concern that "atheism and positivism" seem to have "overthrown everything" yet "Satanism has not been forced to yield an inch."[104] The pious Carhaix exclaims that this situation has arisen because Satan has been "forgotten or neglected."[105] Here, Durtal laments that new generations will be "just like their parents. . . . They will stuff their guts with food and evaluate their souls through their bowels."[106] Ultimately, Durtal recognizes that modern society has replaced the metaphysical priority of soul-craft with material priorities of the world; as a result, society does not wish to understand or willfully act on supernatural phenomena. By ignoring the existence of the devil, society has become primarily damned, and this, Carthaix says, is precisely the devil's mission: "the wiliest stratagem the Devil employed was to get people to deny his own existence."[107] This dark perspective is also communicated by the novel's translated titles *The Damned* and *Down There*. "The damned" may first be assumed to be a niche group of Satanists, but by the end of the novel, readers begin to recognize that Huysmans sees much of popular and modern civilization as being under Satanic influence.

In upholding such a perspective, Huysmans evokes terror in the way that Stephen King refers to terror in *Danse Macabre*.[108] Terror offers a grander source of invisible discomfort. Interestingly, in the last line of the novel, Durtal uses repulsive physical imagery to disgust readers into understanding the severity of humanity's situation. By figuratively describing a body cavity that is filled with food and exudes fecal matter, Huysmans shocks the reader. He uses bodily language (the physical) to ironically communicate the severity of the larger unseen terror (the invisible). Unlike horror literature that invokes

Antichrist figures and presumed apocalyptic futures,[109] *Là-Bas* concludes that apocalyptic conditions have presently unfolded—and have been unfolding. Yet, Huysmans draws this conclusion without evoking extreme signs from Revelations or bombastic Antichrist figures. Huysmans's matter-of-fact approach to this conclusion is in itself discomforting. He does not sensationalize the apocalypse, but rather, he communicates that the impeding apocalypse has been incrementally happening. In fact, it has become so mundane that people have not noticed it anymore. In other words, the blasphemy and behavior of the damned has become socially normalized.

Unlike apocalyptic horror narratives where audiences are not provided solace or an option of solace—again, much like Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby*'s final introduction of an Antichrist—readers of *Là-Bas* are given mystical solace through Catholic orientation. Still, *Là-Bas*'s ending does not provide closure. Durtal does not convert to Catholicism. Although he has overcome some obstacles in the narrative and resisted some (not all) temptations, his attitudes remain much the same. Carhaix remains hopeful about the promises of heaven and prays accordingly. Durtal is presumably left with the dark intellectual insight that the world—what he calls the "horizon"—involves "whirlwinds of ordure."[110] To that, Carhaix agrees with Durtal that the world is in a "state of decomposition" but emphasizes the promises of heaven, rather than the empty promises of the world made by politicians.[111] Spiritual, ethical, aesthetic value is found through transcendence.

The novel brings readers into the subjective suffering of Durtal—alongside epistemological ambivalence and uncertainty—or *aporia*—that can discomfort. Namely, it suggests a grim possibility: although civilized communities reassure themselves of continual progress, they could be moving in the wrong direction—that is, they could be regressing more deeply. While Huysmans's next novel moves into the optimistic elements of Durtal's mystical understanding, *Là-Bas* acts as a necessary first stage. This stage is composed of several steps. First, Durtal generally comes to regard modern civilization as spiritually unfulfilling. Then, Durtal understands the horrors found in misdirected supernaturalism before rejecting them, a point allowing him to finally understand the solace potentially found in the Catholic intellectual and mystic traditions. In other words, *Là-Bas* first affirms the supernatural elements that transcend materialism; then, alongside the affirmation of supernaturalism, the novel's dialectic negation of the devil's advocates of Satanism and occultism introduces readers to the conceivable possibilities of Catholicism.

As earlier established, Catholic horror fiction can use darker elements to serve as a means to an end, and that end is found in the Good, True, and Beautiful. *Là-Bas*'s seductive depictions of Satanism, occult rites, and succubae are not ends in themselves; rather, they serve the Transcendentals.

Durtal's dissatisfaction with dark mysticism allows him to recalibrate his attitude toward Catholic mysticism, a development that unfolds in Huysmans's proceeding novel, *En Route*. Ultimately, *Là-Bas* offers a series of dialectical exchanges between real and fictional worlds, spirituality and realism, good and evil mysticisms—and even between *Là-Bas* and *En Route* as separate pieces of literature. Taken together, these exchanges constitute a robust matrix of dialectics that help move readers' hearts and instruct readers' intellects about Catholic reality.

NOTES

1. Direct quotations within this chapter *Là-Bas* come from the 2001 Terry Hale translation, which is deemed the most authentic and modern. Barbara Beaumont offers a translation of Huysmans's letters. Readers should keep in mind that *Là-Bas* and his letters were originally written in French.

2. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Imp of the Perverse," in *The Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Random House, 1965), 280–84.

3. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Notes from the Underground*, trans. Constance Garnett (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2009).

4. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Seducer's Diary*, trans. Alastair Hannay (New York: Penguin, 2007).

5. J. K. Huysmans, *Marthe: The Story of a Woman* (New York: Lear, 1948).

6. J. K. Huysmans, *The Vatard Sisters*, trans. James C. Babcock (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983).

7. J. K. Huysmans, *Against the Grain: À Rebours*, trans. John Howard (Auckland, NZ: Floating Press, 2009).

8. J. K. Huysmans, *The Road from Decadence: Selected Letters of J. K. Huysmans*, ed. Barbara Estelle Beaumont (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1989), 117.

9. Joseph Pearce, *Literary Giants, Literary Catholics* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius), 335.

10. Pearce, *Literary Giants*, 77.

11. Robert Baldick, *The Life of J.-K. Huysmans* (Oxford: Oxford at Clarendon Press, 1955), 148–49.

12. Baldick, *Life of J.-K. Huysmans*, 149–50.

13. Baldick, *Life of J.-K. Huysmans*, 144–45.

14. Baldick, *Life of J.-K. Huysmans*, 144–45.

15. Baldick, *Life of J.-K. Huysmans*, 139–40.

16. Baldick, *Life of J.-K. Huysmans*, 149.

17. Baldick, *Life of J.-K. Huysmans*, 149.

18. J. K. Huysmans, *En Route*, trans. W. Fleming (Sawtry, UK: Dedalus, 2002).

19. J. K. Huysmans, *The Cathedral*, trans. Clara Bell (Norderstedt, DE: Hansebooks, 2020).

20. J. K. Huysmans, *The Oblate of St. Benedict*, trans. Edward Perceval (Sawtry, UK: Dedalus, 1996).
21. J. K. Huysmans, *Becalmed*, trans. Terry Hale (London: Atlas, 1992).
22. Huysmans, *Letters*, 110.
23. Huysmans, *Letters*, 145.
24. Huysmans, *Letters*, 145.
25. Huysmans, *Letters*, 144.
26. Huysmans, *Letters*, 118.
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54. Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, 6.
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82. Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, 96.
83. Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, 119.
84. Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, 119.
85. Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, 45.
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91. Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, 13–14.
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95. Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, 257.
96. Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, 188.
97. These have been connected to Catholic theology by Saint Bonaventure and others.
98. Huysmans, *Là-Bas*, 189.
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Chapter 4

Rhetorical Dialectics of Robert Hugh Benson's *The Light Invisible* (1903)

As a Catholic priest, monsignor, and eventually chaplain to Pope Pius X, English writer Robert Hugh Benson (1871–1914) published a range of science fiction novels, historical fiction, and apologetical works. Several of his books were quite popular in their time, most famously, his futuristic dystopian novel *Lord of the World* (published in 1907).[1] Consequently, he was represented by a top literary agent of the time, James Pinker, who also represented canonical writers such as Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Henry James, and H. G. Wells.[2] In addition to his more well-known work, Benson also wrote supernatural tales, specifically two novels of short horror stories: *The Light Invisible* and *A Mirror of Shalott*. *The Light Invisible* was his first collection of ghost stories and his first published book of fiction.[3] He published it in 1903[4]—the same year that he converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism.[5] In the eleven years after becoming Catholic and taking Holy Orders, he published eighteen additional novels. He wrote many of these works while serving as a Catholic priest. As a result, many of his novels communicate Catholic perspectives.

Robert Hugh Benson's novel *The Light Invisible* compiles a series of various tales into a cohesive framework. Resembling traditional ghost stories, the tales illustrate a variety of supernatural occurrences. While the characters of *Là-Bas* merely consider the supernatural, as discussed in the previous chapter, Benson's characters actually encounter supernatural or unexplainable occurrences with spiritual implications. However, even as Benson's tales offer more explicit representations of the supernatural the stories are still heavily masked by *agnosis* and end in *aporia*. Benson's *The Light Invisible* offers mystical horror—that is, an *intellectus* form of contemplation. Whereas *Là-Bas* modeled the *ratio* type of contemplation mixed with

Durtal's occasional pursuits of *vita activa*, *The Light Invisible* significantly diverges from Huysmans's text.

The Light Invisible is a subtly Catholic novel; therefore, it is more accurately classified as Christian mystic horror rather than proper Catholic horror. However, the novel provides a compelling literary entry point of Catholic-minded horror, for it conveys Benson's distinctively religious approach to horror storytelling. Specifically, it is helpful to understand *The Light Invisible* as the precursor to Benson's 1907 *A Mirror of Shalott*, his later and more overt Catholic novel/collection of short stories. In this sense, *The Light Invisible* introduces readers to Benson's mystic-minded horror, an approach that counters dark mysticism as found in Lovecraftian stories or the contemporary Lovecraftian-influenced Thomas Ligotti school of pessimistic cosmic horror. Ultimately, *The Light Invisible* balances the fear of the dark with an optimistic supernatural realism.

Because it seldomly features dialectical dialogue, *The Light Invisible* differs from both Benson's later writings and some of the other Catholic horror fiction I discuss in this book. In place of such dialogue, Benson weaves rhetorical dialectical architecture into the scenes and novel structure itself. As a more subtle rhetorical approach, the dialectics communicate a type of supernatural humanism that resonates with Kenneth Burke's way of thinking about religious rhetorics. Burke is an influential American rhetorician and literary scholar of the twentieth century; drawing on his interests and experiences as a Protestant Christian, he explores how dialectics cooperates with rhetoric and how mysticism informs humanistic communication.[6] In applying Burke's work to *The Light Invisible*, we can gain a more precise understanding of the inner rhetorical dialectics of Catholic horror literature.

BENSON AND SUPERNATURALISM

Monsignor Robert Hugh Benson lived a relatively short life. After converting to Catholicism in 1903, Benson became a priest in the following year, officially taking the sacrament of Holy Orders. While Benson only published three works of supernatural horror fiction, he was fascinated by the ambiguities of the spiritual realm. As a Catholic priest, he condemned the spiritualism and theosophy that pervaded the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; but he frequently sought out haunted houses and ghost encounters.[7] For example, he once slept in a room of a house where someone committed suicide, seeking to witness a ghost; much to his disappointment, however, he saw nothing.[8] According to Benson, the potential existence of such supernatural phenomena did not contradict the teachings of the church.[9] Rather

than viewing ghosts as tortured souls, Benson thought that spirits could be felt in certain spaces.[10] These spaces conveyed a connection with the dead in a similar way that relics and other material objects could sacramentally signify holiness.[11] Because it has the capacity to evoke powerful emotions in the mind and senses,[12] Benson recognized that the natural world collided with the spiritual world, and this perspective pervades much of his horror fiction. Ultimately, this dialectic between the supernatural mystical world and the natural active world is at play in his fiction. Benson's work therefore engages with a dialectic that is crucial to Roman Catholicism.

The religious aspects of *The Light Invisible* are interesting given that Benson wrote the novel when he was an Anglican clergyman who would convert to Catholicism only months after the book's publication. Because he wrote his second book of supernatural tales, *A Mirror of Shalott* (1907), as a Catholic priest, the later novel offers a Catholicized version of *The Light Invisible* in many ways. *A Mirror of Shalott* emphasizes Catholic doctrine more directly whereas *The Light Invisible* offers a more ecumenical, spiritual approach. Benson fully recognized this difference. In his autobiographical *Confessions of a Convert*, he explains that the earlier *The Light Invisible* "put away the contemplation of cold-cut dogma" and looked to "clothe it with the warm realities of warm spiritual experience."[13] Despite the contrast between the two novels, the works broadly resemble one another; both are cohesive collections of fictional tales about unsettling supernatural phenomena that foster mystical inquiry.

Whereas the more formal *A Mirror of Shalott* features various Catholic priests sharing supernatural stories within an orderly "unprofessional symposium," *The Light Invisible* features informal, intimate conversations between only two characters: a neutral narrator and a mystically attuned old priest who Benson deliberately avoids labeling as either Catholic or Anglican.[14] Since *The Light Invisible*'s conversations are not rigidly organized in a "symposium" format, the dialogue between the narrator and the elderly priest flows casually. The priest primarily leads the conversations over the course of two lengthy visits by the narrator to the priest's villa: one trip during spring, one trip during winter. During these visits, the priest recounts both his own mystical experiences and those he has heard from his acquaintances as well. The stories generally involve unnerving apparitions, meetings with (presumable) angels, and other unexplained phenomena.

Many of the priest's stories recount personal supernatural experiences. In "The Watcher," for example, the priest details how he, as a child, witnessed a pale diabolical face in the bushes of a forest. In "Over the Gateway," he describes seeing a floating priest at prayer in his garden. In "The Bridge over the Stream," the priest illustrates Death, as a specter, pushing a child in front of a barreling horse and carriage. And in "The Traveler," he tells the story of

Thomas Becket's murderer confessing his offenses on the anniversary of the crime. The priest also relates stories about his friends' encounters with the supernatural. One of these retold stories is "Consolartrix Afflictorium," which involves a ghostly woman kneeling over a child's bed. Another tale, titled "With Dyed Garments," concerns a series of real-life tragedies that resemble Christ's passion.

Before each story, the priest and narrator engage in conversational banter, often about mysticism in general. In these prefaces, the narrator frequently describes the setting—whether he is in the villa's garden, walking outside the villa, or inside the villa itself. The last few chapters shift into a darker approach. The narrator stops recounting supernatural stories told by the priest and instead tells his own supernatural tale *about* the priest. Here, the narrator recounts the priest's dying days in the villa, describing how the priest witnesses mysterious supernatural forces and engages in battles against possession.

Although eccentric, *The Light Invisible* was quite well received by the readership of the time, and the book sold well to both Catholics and Anglicans.[15] Yet, despite its success, Benson admitted that he was not particularly satisfied with the book. From a spiritual perspective, he felt that it overemphasized sentimentality and imagination.[16] Although he aimed to hit the "water-line" between Catholicism and Anglicanism, he admits that the fiction too greatly stressed spiritual intuition and personal realization rather than Faith, Reason, and the Will.[17] In short, Benson "dislike[d], quite intensely" *The Light Invisible* for not being Catholic enough.[18] As this chapter demonstrates, however, the work still offers a literary rhetoric that aligns with Catholic horror fiction, and it illustrates a particularly valuable socio-spiritual approach that fuses literature with the *vita contemplativa*. The novel's rhetorical dialectics provides readers with what Kenneth Burke would call "equipment for living"[19] to help readers navigate the world as creatures who wrestle with "separation" from their "natural condition."[20] In its emphasis on the supernatural, the novel establishes a crucial ingredient for developing such equipment.

BENSON AND BURKE

The Latin word *supernaturalis*—what Burke calls "super-nature"—suggests an ontological dimension that transcends nature. Throughout history, people have encountered the *supernaturalis* through active contemplative practices and spiritual rituals—as well as external phenomena. In these ways, the supernatural is thought to spill over into human experiences and the natural world. Literary horror scholars Raúl Rodríguez-Hernández and Claudia

Schaefer point out that these supernatural experiences collapse self-evident knowledge "in on itself."[21] Much like Edmund Burke's description of the sublime,[22] the estranged experiences can spark joyous wonder, but they can also evoke awe, fear, anxiety, and dread. According to Rodríguez-Hernández and Schaefer, supernatural experiences oscillate between joy and terror rather than conveying one of these feelings exclusively.[23] Prompting a range of reactions and emotional states, supernatural enterprises can become dynamic pursuits that inspire both hunger for intellectual knowledge and fear of the vast cosmos. To this extent, supernatural horror literature, as artistic expression and representation, often portrays this full spectrum of human emotions and sensibilities.

As discussed in previous chapters, horror fiction can communicate possibilities and probabilities about kinds of truth; it can also influence audiences' attitudes about these possibilities and probabilities. Russell Kirk, a twentieth-century literary critic and Catholic supernatural story writer, acknowledges the unique effects of horror writing. In "A Cautionary Note on the Ghostly Tale," he writes that ghost stories can waltz with the unknown "unburdened by the impedimenta of twenty-century naturalism"; in so doing, such tales can also "disclose aspects of human conduct and human longing to which the positivistic psychologist has blinded himself."[24] To Kirk, supernatural stories highlight nature as being beyond "fleshy sensation"; the stories reveal "that something may lie above human nature, and something below it."[25]

Kenneth Burke's framework of rhetoric, dramatism, and mysticism sympathizes with Kirk's "something" that lies beyond human nature. Although often known for his influential work on rhetoric and communicative identification, Kenneth Burke also understood the limits of human epistemology and communication. He had a reverence for the vertical axis of philosophical and mystical knowing as well as the horizontal practical axis of humanistic communication. Given this perspective, Burke's practical understanding of "super-nature" can help frame the rhetorical functionality of supernatural horror tales in general. In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke outlines that the externality of supernaturalism can endow human beings with "derived dignity" that extends "outside of itself."[26] He explains that the super-nature does not oppose nature. In short, supernaturalism can be seen as a "supernaturalist humanism." He recognizes that super-nature transcends human perception even though super-nature can only be digested or experienced in human terms. As such, both super-nature and nature can humble human beings into a cooperative relationship. According to this perspective, human beings should look up to the supernatural order of the cosmos, and they should also look around at each other and their environment.[27] In other words, cultural identification is important, but so is cosmic identification.[28] From this perspective,

Burke provides an appropriate lens with which to view Benson's stories because, like Burke, Benson also recognizes the human value of super-nature.

As a rhetoric of fiction, Benson's stories highlight this important human struggle with super-nature. As I shall argue, the dramatic dynamism in Benson's *The Light Invisible* reveals how Catholic horror literature communicates what Burke calls "supernaturalist humanism" and "unity without conformity." Specifically, the dramatic functionality of Benson's stories is rhetorically directed toward the reader, and Burke's understanding of mysticism and negation is crucial to this rhetorical dynamic. Ultimately, *The Light Invisible*'s rhetorical emphasis on "unity without conformity" not only moves supernatural horror beyond mere entertainment but also sidesteps heavy-handed ideological moralism. In this sense, the novel comes to balance social cooperation with mystical identification.

DRAMATISM

In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Kenneth Burke famously explains that literary "equipment for living" acts as "proverbs writ large" within the "general sociological picture."[29] Much as proverbs offer "strategies" or "attitudes" "for dealing with situations," so can literature.[30] To read a literary work is not simply to consume particular information; rather, the practice of reading entails symbolic action, so that "Reading a book on the attaining of success is in itself the symbolic attaining of that success."[31] Since "the symbolic act is the *dancing of an attitude*," according to Burke,[32] the act of reading mystical or supernatural literature symbolically affirms and delivers mystical attitudes to readers. Not only do such attitudes "dance" *within* readers, but readers also "dance" *with* the mystical attitudes. In this way, mystical literature can connect readers to what Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar calls the "Theo-drama"; by assenting to the *fictional* drama, readers aspire toward a *grand spiritual* drama. In this way, literature moves readers away from a perspective that seeks verifiable material knowledge (*gnosis*) into a dramatic perspective that involves metaphysical uncertainty (*agnosis*). Such uncertainty, in turn, generates hunger for objective understanding of super-nature.

This grand perspective can be seen not only in the tales that comprise Benson's *The Light Invisible* but also in the preambles to the stories when the priest offers insights about mystical knowing. Moreover, these insights can extend to Benson's literature itself. For example, before the priest tells his story "In the Convent Chapel," he outlines the limits of the intellect. Just because something cannot be intellectually argued, does not mean that it is not necessarily true. He explains, "it is one of the signs of reality in the spiritual world that no one can ever describe so much as he knows."[33] In this

framework, imaginative storytelling can more accurately express spiritual knowledge than explicit argumentation. Before the priest continues to the story, he further notes: "Most of the tales I have told you are of the imaginative vision, by which I do not mean that the vision is in any way unreal or untrue, which is what most people mean by 'imaginative,' but only that it presents itself in the form of a visible picture."[34] He then cautions against seeing imagination as a form of escape from truth and reality since "it is an abuse of that faculty to employ it chiefly in visualizing fancies."[35] To this end, the priest justifies telling stories of experience—in this case, horror tales—by explaining that these imaginative tales provide a greater sense of reality and truth, not just entertainment.

The priest's mode of persuasion and instruction mirrors Benson's own rhetorical mode in *The Light Invisible*. Through *The Light Invisible*—and his priest character—Benson persuades and teaches readers about supernatural and mystical possibilities within a greater sense of reality. This approach differs from other horror writers around Benson's time, including his brothers, A. C. Benson and E. F. Benson, and his family friend, M. R. James. Although these individuals wrote supernatural stories with some mystical elements,[36] they did not evoke such instructional and persuasive rhetoric offered by Benson's priest in *The Light Invisible*.

An example of this contrast can be found in E. F. Benson's "Between the Lights." The short story features a character named Everard Chandler, who tells a personal Christmas ghost story at a party he has hosted in celebration of the holiday. Everard narrates his own transcendent experiences, describing how he would pass in and out of a fantastic reality during everyday events in life. For instance, the transformations happened once when he was sitting on the lawn of his house and once when he was hiking. The narrator—and E. F. Benson himself—mystifies his audiences with these supernatural experiences not only as fiction but also as gestures to the unknown. For instance, as a member of the Christmas party, the narrator anticipates the spooky story at the beginning of the tale, saying, "we had played hide-and-seek with all the power of earnestness that was in us. But now—so it seemed to me—there was going to be real hide-and-seek, real terrors were going to lurk in dark corners, or if not real terrors, terrors so convincing as to assume the garb of reality, were going to pounce on us."[37] The quotation reveals the distinctive purpose of E. F. Benson's stories. The invoking of the realness means to evoke the fear, not to necessarily teach audiences about the mystical tapestry of the cosmos. In fact, at the end of the story, Everard says, "there are hundreds of ways in which you may explain [the alternative reality]. But the coincidence was an odd one, and those who believe in second sight might find an instance of their hobby in it."[38] This line seems to imply that a mystical reality may or may not exist and that an interest in mysticism can be seen as a hobby, not a

serious pursuit of truth as maintained by Christianity—and especially Roman Catholicism.

The perspective in "Between the Lights" differs from that of *The Light Invisible*. Unlike his brother's story, Robert Hugh Benson's work does not shy away from exploring spiritual truths. Nor does he wave these away for mere hobbyists to investigate. Rather, through the character of the priest in *The Light Invisible*, Benson offers positions about the reality of mysticism to a neutral partner—that is, the narrator—and to readers. Although the commentary may not be deeply theological, the inclusion of a priestly teacher telling the stories in a didactic manner adds an instructional rhetorical dimension to *The Light Invisible*. This focus is seldom found in other popular supernatural horror stories of the time, including work by his own brother. Benson's *The Light Invisible* is therefore noteworthy for offering insights into the grand Theo-drama.

Resembling the all-encompassing Theo-drama itself, *The Light Invisible*'s stories act inclusively. The representation of Christian spirituality can appeal to a broad range of readers. For instance, the priest demonstrates this inclusive spirit in the tale titled "Unto Babes," which tells the story of God revealing the supernatural mysteries to a mentally challenged villager. After the priest narrates this tale, he explains that intellectual prowess is helpful, but not necessary, to know God. To this point, he recognizes that if it were not, intellectuals would stand a better chance of salvation than people who are not as intellectual—and that would be "as absurd as if rich people should be nearer to God than poor people."[39] He admits "talents are distributed unevenly, it is true: to one ten and to another five; but each has one pound, all alike."[40] The priest concludes that "intellect has not much to do with the knowledge of God; and that the things which He hides from the wise and prudent He reveals to babes."[41] Similarly, Benson's *The Light Invisible* is not overly theological or doctrinal. As a form of literary rhetoric, it delivers imaginative experiences about the supernatural rather than making explicit intellectual arguments about metaphysics as seen in *Là-Bas* and Benson's later work, *A Mirror of Shalott*.

The old priest's storytelling is analogous to Benson's own storytelling, which gives rise to *The Light Invisible* itself. Although they are fiction, Robert Hugh Benson's supernatural tales provide a dramatic platform to communicate the larger canvas of reality to readers. As evidenced by *The Light Invisible* (and showcased by the priest character in the novel), the communication of spiritual reality (and the human participation in it) involves both natural and social dimensions. To this end, the tales successively depict natural settings (nature) as well as social interactions (storytelling) within natural settings. The fiction represents the reality that Benson wished to express, and his approach is intrinsically dramatic. According to Kenneth

Burke, "realism leads into symbolism," and "the succession of scenes both realistically reflects the course of action and symbolizes it."[42] The scene-act or dramatic scenario of Benson's text, where a priest conveys stories about spiritual phenomenon to the narrator (who then conveys the priest's storytelling to readers), symbolizes the social dimensions of spirituality. The interpersonal dynamic of the novel represents the collective human pursuit to better understand transcendental truths about the cosmos. Through the two characters' conversations, the text dramatizes the social communication of spiritual experiences. The novel also promotes a type of spiritual naturalism in its emphasis on nature.

In *A Grammar of Motives*, Burke explains that the "scene contains the act" and the "acts and agents should be consistent with the nature of the scene."[43] Moreover, Burke explains that "implicit in the quality of a scene [is] the quality of the action that is to take place within it."[44] He adds that "the stage-set contains the action *ambiguously*," and "in the course of the play's development this ambiguity is converted into a corresponding *articulacy*."[45] In this way there is an analogy where the "scene is to act as implicit is to explicit." Given this relationship, "one can deduce the quality of the action from the quality of the setting."[46] Benson's connection between act and scene—and the sequencing of scenes in the text itself—helps illuminate the dialectic between naturalism and supernaturalism, or worldliness and mysticism, in *The Light Invisible*. Much like *Là-Bas*, Benson's novel places readers into a social conversation that rhetorically brings them into the dialectical process. But, more specific to *The Light Invisible*, the sociality allows readers to enter into the scene-act relationship.

In *The Light Invisible*, readers can deduce the quality of the action—human connection to naturalism and supernaturalism—through the quality of the novel's scenes. The scene-to-act complementarity becomes an important dramatic tactic for conveying the ambiguity of the supernatural. For example, *The Light Invisible*'s settings feature lush descriptions of nature, especially in the first half of the novel. Many of the stories are set outside in rural locations or forests. Moreover, the priest often relays his supernatural stories to the narrator when they are in outside settings such as gardens or the rural countryside. These natural settings reveal a crucial synthesis that the priest calls attention to in the first chapter of the book. Before telling the "Green Robe" story, he says: "I generally know the difference between the spiritual and the natural, yet they appear to me simultaneously, as if on the same plane."[47] Much like the priest's simultaneous perception of these arenas, Benson's stories—especially *The Light Invisible*'s early stories—also communicate this sense of simultaneity to readers. Benson utilizes the dramatic mode of scene-act to communicate a both/and relationship between spirituality and naturalism. In other words, he conveys a perspective of spiritual

naturalism that resembles Huysmans's understanding: spirituality is naturalistic but in an invisible manner.

However, these lush natural settings disappear about halfway through the book, appropriately, when winter arrives. This movement away from peaceful nature reveals a shifting attitude toward the supernatural that turns to emphasize a darker understanding. In *The Light Invisible*, the narrator must eventually part ways with the priest and return to London; after his departure, however, he returns to the villa months later to spend Christmas with the priest. As a result, the last five chapters/tales unfold at the priest's home during the winter. Because the weather is colder and the priest's health is failing, the priest and narrator take shorter walks, and during these the priest must lean on the narrator for support. Whether they are inside or outside the house, the narrator rarely describes their surroundings, virtually ignoring the setting. In fact, the narrator notes that the door into the garden has been kept closed, and "a heavy curtain hung over it."[48]

As these later stories are primarily set and told in darker spaces (indoors), these scenes become figuratively darker as well. The scenes increasingly communicate a darker sense of forbidding supernatural dread. This ominous tone reaches a crescendo in the final chapters, which depict an extended possession involving grotesque suffering and spiritual combat. In other words, the book's arrangement fully matures from "weird tales" into "horror tales." In a way, the novel's sequential "scenes" mirror a human life trajectory—specifically, the priest's life. The novel's early stories are peacefully set in nature and recount occasions from the priest's childhood that often involve other children; as such, they are less threatening. The later stories, on the other hand, are more solemn; they involve adult characters and ultimately end with the priest dying after mysterious contact with dark forces.

As indicated earlier, *The Light Invisible*'s short stories do not provide much closure. Often, they end with more questions than answers. In fact, the conclusion of the book itself encourages open interpretation. As a result, *The Light Invisible*'s supernatural stories act as separate but connected "unending conversations," conversations that include the final recounting of the priest's death. In this way, the diverse but unified collection of supernatural tales resembles Burke's parlor analogy found in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*:

> Imagine that you enter a parlor. You come late. When you arrive, others have long preceded you, and they are engaged in a heated discussion, a discussion too heated for them to pause and tell you exactly what it is about. In fact, the discussion had already begun long before any of them got there, so that no one present is qualified to retrace for you all the steps that had gone before. You listen for a while, until you decide that you have caught the tenor of the argument; then you put in your oar. Someone answers; you answer him; another comes to

> your defense; another aligns himself against you, to either the embarrassment or gratification of your opponent, depending upon the quality of your ally's assistance. However, the discussion is interminable. The hour grows late, you must depart. And you do depart, with the discussion still vigorously in progress.[49]

Unlike social interactions and arguments that seek closure, *The Light Invisible* offers an unending conversation that fosters more vague ambiguity than concrete clarity. After all, the book's stories communicate experiences, not explicit arguments; any argument is implied. This ambiguity increases when the supernatural phenomena are introduced. Much like the curious narrator who is drawn back to the old priest in the second half of the book, the supernatural ambiguity persuades readers to remain curious; it therefore functions rhetorically. Like the narrator, the reader receives no sense of closure. The openness keeps the conversation going—it is "still vigorously in progress"—after the end of each tale and even after the priest dies at the end of the book.

The Light Invisible continues to emphasize the importance of social interaction when wrestling with questions of super-nature, for Benson consciously embeds supernatural stories within conversations between the priest and the narrator. In these conversations, the priest tells stories about his own supernatural encounters as well as his friends' supernatural encounters. Whereas *Là-Bas*'s dialectic is energized by philosophical dialogue involving characters with strongly held positions, *The Light Invisible* features a neutral narrator and a priest who conveys supernatural experiences—many of which the priest recounts from others. To again gesture to Burke's "scene-act," these conversational scenes themselves communicate the importance of social act. Several stories reveal how solitary silence—or the absence/refusal of social engagement—can be spiritually unhealthy when taken to extreme measures. Consequently, Benson communicates the importance of social interaction within the spiritual life.[50] For example, when the narrator first arrives back at the villa in the winter to meet with the priest, the coachman tells him that the priest became "very much aged" during the time that the narrator was away from the priest; the priest, he says, almost never left the house, and on the rare occasions when he did, the priest stayed close by, sitting directly next to the house.[51] The coachman also notes that "there had been days of almost complete silence" where the priest would not talk; instead, he would only leaf through old letters and books.[52] Yet, once the narrator returns to the villa, the priest becomes more animated and engaged. They go on walks, and the priest shares more supernatural tales with the narrator. The priest's health improves once he can discuss supernatural matters with another person again, and this improvement suggests the importance of the social dimensions of spirituality.

This socio-spiritual emphasis is also evidenced in the story "Under Which King?," a story prompted when the curious narrator asks the priest about Quietism, a particular school of mysticism. As a preface to the story, the priest explains that the practice of Quietism demands passivity of its practitioners; they must abandon all active contemplative effort, and their souls must remain completely still.[53] To better explain this practice, the priest tells the story of his friend (who he names "Lord A") who deeply studied and practiced Quietism. As his friend practiced, he began to move away from rational faculties of the intellect and toward faculties of intuition inspired by the Holy Ghost.[54] In the story, Lord A is tasked with persuading a particularly belligerent noble (who he names "Lord B") to settle a dispute with another noble. Rather than preparing an argument or conversational points in advance, Lord A, the Quietist, meets with Lord B and merely waits passively in silence for the words to come to him. After minutes pass, statements spontaneously begin to flow from his mouth. Strangely, as soon as the words leave his mouth, he forgets them. The reader of the tale is never told the content of the utterances either. Lord B reacts in horror to these statements (again, the reader does not know why). Still being controlled by an unknown entity, Lord A walks out of Lord B's room, faints, but eventually walks home. Two hours later, Lord B immediately settles the dispute and becomes physically sick. While he successfully arbitrated the dispute through a bizarre interaction after being possessed, Lord A stops practicing Quietism altogether. He fears that he has meddled with supernatural entities—possibly evil entities—beyond his control. Ultimately, the story emphasizes the need for reasonable social interaction rather than the pursuit of a spirituality that requires people to completely resign freewill and rationality to the supernatural.

This perspective aligns with Burke's socio-spiritual perspective. Although Burke privileges serious mysticism rather than superficial mysticism,[55] he is ultimately concerned with supernatural *humanism*. Benson's stories—like "Under Which King?"—peer into this intersection between supernaturalism and humanism. They advocate for a balance between active and passive spirituality—that is, tempering spirituality with intellectualism and tempering silence with speech. Various tales seem to promote a dialectic between social communication and supernatural silence. They stretch the dialectic of speaking and silence beyond human-to-human dynamics. Such tales complicate the dialectic between rhetoric and silence[56] into a dialectic between speaking-spiritual-silence-of-what-cannot-be-spoken and speaking-as-speaking. This new dialectic acknowledges that human experience does not only revolve around interaction with other human beings. It emphasizes the dialectic between human-to-human relationships (what Burke might call "answerable opponents") and human-to-supernature relationships (what Burke calls

"unanswerable opponents"). In *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, Burke describes such unanswerable opponents, stating that if you

> silence the human opponent . . . you are brought flat against the unanswerable opponent, the nature of brute reality itself. In so far as your meanings are incorrect, and you spawn them and maintain them by organizational efficiency without the opportunity of correction, you are hurled without protection against the unanswerable opponent, the opponent that, not speaking, cannot be quashed by the quietus.[57]

Burke's word choice, which relies on terms such as "brute" and "hurled," conveys the aggressiveness and terrifying nature of an encounter with this unanswerable opponent, an opponent that "cannot by quashed." Horror literature arouses similar feelings of terror because it portrays characters as they confront the unanswerability of super-nature that can silence or transcend social interactions.

Emphasizing the genre's suitability for exploring connections between spirituality and super-nature, Benson's stories draw on the tradition of negative theology. As shown in *The Rhetoric of Religion* and *Language as Symbolic Action*, Burke finds negative theology to be an important touchstone in communication. He references it throughout his discussions of Man as the "inventor of the negative."[58] He recognizes that, although God may only be known through incommunicable revelation, theology's task is to paradoxically communicate the incommunicability.[59] Benson rhetorically extends this theological perspective outward into horror fiction, an arena that does not primarily rely on theological treatises or apologetical approaches to communicate metaphysical truths. As evidenced in *The Light Invisible*, Benson communicates the incommunicable through narratives focused on the supernatural. He communicates the negative by depicting other human beings interacting with—and attempting to communicate—the negative. His fiction evokes the discomfort that arises from such interactions, and it leads readers to share in the experience of these intense feelings.

Discomfort seems to emanate from the dialectic between "action" and "symbolic act" in respect to the unanswerability of "super-nature." Throughout *The Light Invisible*, the priest tells stories about his own supernatural experiences and the supernatural experiences of others. The stories and the communicative interactions are symbolic acts. The back-and-forth movement that characterizes the rhetorical exchange of information allows for social reciprocity, answerability, and comfort. Yet, once the priest is absorbed by the visions on his death bed at the end of the book, the priest and narrator no longer speak about experiences from the past; they instead become absorbed in present-moment action. The priest and narrator become

actively engaged in the presence of the mystical horror; they feel the discomfort of the negative. Still, the priest is not merely silent; the priest speaks aloud to the room and describes what he sees unfolding outside of him—and perhaps, *inside* of him. When confronted with ineffable reality, he manages his discomfort by communicating to answerable partners—that is, to the fellow human beings in the room with him. His final utterances signal to this space between "non-symbolic motion" (the priest's experience with a mystical reality and his own mortality) and "symbolic act" (his deliberate speaking about this experience to the witnesses in his room).

In short, the final chapters of *The Light Invisible* demonstrate the mitigation of supernatural discomfort through symbolic-action. Reciprocally, the fiction also reveals the discomfort that arises when characters are unable to symbolically act due to the unanswerability of super-nature. This juxtaposition becomes a primary thread of horror woven throughout *The Light Invisible*. The horror certainly flows from the unknowability of the ineffable mystical reality; but it also flows from the inability to socially communicate mystical experiences to other human beings. Benson's stories reveal those frustrating silences and instances of nonknowledge; they place readers in the same discomforting position of being isolated even when among fellow human beings. The horror genre becomes an apt genre to rhetorically communicate that discomfort in an imaginatively identifiable manner.

NEGATION

Storytelling fundamentally communicates experience. The mode can recreate feelings and experiences that transcend language. Storytelling can move readers into feelings about what is symbolized rather than merely conveying literal information. As Burke observes, analyzing and communicating super-nature is not "ideally reducible" to information theory or the mechanical interpretation of signals.[60] Humans are dramatic creatures and not machines; therefore, they make an "empirical distinction . . . between their approach to 'people' and their approach to 'things.'"[61] This Burkean hinge is found in *The Light Invisible*: a hinge between external "things"—material and spiritual externalities—and the intersubjective connection with "people." Storytelling—as executed by Benson and the old priest in the story—becomes the dramatic means to negotiate that hinge. The communication of that negotiation necessitates the use of negation.

Conveying experience through storytelling can be an end in itself—and the stories do not have to reach definitive conclusions. Although some stories in *The Light Invisible* are interpreted by the priest, other stories (including the final story about the death of the priest) receive no explicit commentary, and

the meaning is deliberately left vague. As mentioned previously, the stories resemble Burke's "unending conversations": readers must "depart" with the conversation "still vigorously in progress."[62] The ineffability of spiritual experience naturally lends itself to this openness. And to communicate these open spaces, interloculars must be rhetorically creative. As Burke explains in *The Rhetoric of Religion*: "our words for . . . the supernatural or 'ineffable,' are borrowed from our words for the sorts of things we can talk about literally," and these terms come from the "world of experience."[63] Ultimately, gulfs extend between words and the things they represent.[64] Therefore, a sense of openness and absence always hovers over any discussion of spiritual matters, and communication of these topics requires attention toward the negative.

According to Burke, the human being is the "inventor of the negative (or moralized by the negative)";[65] he can "use 'No' intelligently, and not merely like an automaton."[66] Put in practice, this capacity can include focused "supersensory" meditations on "what is not" included in the material world; humans, that is, are able to deliberate on the contrast between the spiritual and the material world. Such mystical meditations can be enriched by what Burke calls "perspective by incongruity," an orientation that involves more than merely contrasting informational references. He explains that incongruity is "a perspective with interpretative ingredients" that is "dramatic" and "less purely technical."[67] And it involves aesthetic means of contrasting terms and perspectives within a given whole, much like differing characters within a united dramatic play, as Burke explains.[68]

As a writer and a priest, Benson was committed to dramatizing the negative. Throughout his nonfiction work, he promotes meditation about absence instead of daydreaming about "This-Worldliness." For example, in a personal letter to a spiritually stricken friend, Benson advises that an individual should "wretch oneself free, continuously and brutally, from all the material points, whether persons, places, or things, round which one's imagination has been circling. One must do this both interiorly and exteriorly—always and everywhere. One must deliberately exercise one's imagination upon the absence of those things."[69] Similarly, *The Light Invisible* acts as a series of meditations on absence through supernatural horror narratives. Much like Benson, the priest character sees the imagination as a tool allowing humans to peer into a grander reality not as a means of escaping the grander reality.

Therefore, Benson offers similar mystic messaging through *The Light Invisible*. And Burke would be sympathetic to this type of messaging since it fosters practical mystic attitudes. After all, Burke was concerned with the uses of symbols and language to cultivate attitudinal mysticism.[70] Embracing ambiguity, attitudinal mysticism allows contradictory perspectives to exist all at once, opening up the discourse.[71] For Burke, such mysticism allows people

to see "around the corner of our accepted verbalizations."[72] And, according to Debra Hawhee, this Burkean mystical method unfolds "by challenging and expanding the limitations of one's perspective, by invoking the yet-unseen, and thinking beyond the now by thinking the now in exaggerated even grotesque terms."[73]

The grotesque can be found throughout the descriptive elements in Benson's *The Light Invisible*. It is especially evident in his depictions of suffering and death. Specifically, Benson's horror fiction offers what Burke calls "planned incongruity," a framework that can provide insight into a grotesque "realm of gargoyles." In *Permanence and Change*, Burke argues that, much like the gargoyles often adorning medieval churches, the grotesque—as "planned incongruity"—overturns an "order of classification" to emphasize another perspective that has yet to be grasped by the orthodox mind.[74] Burke explains that such impiety can be revolutionary, and through incongruity, it can innovate a kind of mysticism.[75] Benson's supernatural horror tales implement a similar approach. Unlike traditional expressions of Christian mysticism seen in works by St. John of the Cross, St. Teresa of Avila, and Meister Eckhart, Benson's writing violates the "order of classification" and frames it through unsettling stories about ghosts, terror, and suffering. Like gargoyles on a medieval church, the stories rhetorically provide new "impious" entry points into contemplating super-nature. In short, Benson carries out Burke's pithy advice about incongruity as articulated in his 1931 book *Counter-Statement*: "When in Rome, do as the Greeks."[76] The genre of supernatural horror fiction, a "realm of gargoyles" unto itself, upends traditional communication of mystic attitudes. Figuratively, Benson "does as the Greeks" by writing horror fiction.

This incongruity of the grotesque can be clearly seen in the final pages of *The Light Invisible*. Here, the dying priest declares that he is being assaulted by "the sorrows of death" and announces several visions. When he glimpses "the sorrows of death" at the window of his room, the priest describes them as "pale faces" with "thin fingers."[77] After recovering in the morning, the priest then has a final vision before dying. In this final scene, the priest's eyes express a "terrible intensity," and his face becomes deeply wrinkled and furrowed; but then suddenly, the doorbell rings to signal that someone has arrived. Upon hearing the doorbell chime, the priest smiles, and his face suddenly becomes smooth skinned, rosy cheeked, and childlike.[78] When the priest then proclaims that someone is coming into the room, the narrator sees nothing. Then, finally, the priest dies. This benign absent invisible presence, juxtaposed with descriptions of the priest's grotesque visions, offers the "perspective by incongruity" that not only invokes Hawhee's "yet unseen" and "beyond the now," but also conveys a type of attitudinal mysticism. This final scene is neither exclusively joyful nor terrifying; it entails aspects of

both emotions. The depiction of the priest's death, then, curiously transcends joy and terror.

The novel ends with absence and *aporia*. It emphasizes the unknowability of death rather than knowability of life. Rather than focusing on the living narrator, the final chapter concludes with the priest falling back into the bed, the servant laying him down, and the servant being told that the Rector has arrived at the house. After the chaos of the previous chapters, the final death scene concludes peacefully. This calming shift leaves readers wondering if the priest was being literal when he announced the cryptic line: "Behold He stands at the door and knocks"[79] wherein the inclusion of the capital letter "*H*" in "He" implies God. When juxtaposed with this mysterious line, the priest's final utterance—"He is coming, my son. He is here. Look!"[80]—also implies a mystical connection. Additionally, these lines invite readers to engage in their own interpretative reflections. After all, it is possible that the priest could be referring to the Rector who literally arrived at the house, a spirit in the room visible only to him, or something subjectively seen in his mind's eye. The absence of clarity does not limit interpretations but affirms all options as spiritual possibilities. Benson's choice to end the novel here also suggests an openness of mystical subject matter. Rather than emphasizing *gnosis* or full specific understanding, the novel ends with spiritual *agnosis* or unknowability.

As such, Benson's fictional meditations do not stifle inquiry by providing hyper-specific answers about the Christian Theo-drama; rather, his narratives unite readers by cultivating their humble receptivity to open inquiry. And the horror is strategically rhetorical. To be effective, the unsettling and violent imagery cooperatively works with the delightful dimensions of the narrative (specifically, the social good will between priest and narrator and the peaceful descriptions of nature). This competitively cooperative approach[81]—as seen in classical dialectics—helps moderate the unsettling experience of the horror itself. And as Burke points out in one of his rare discussions of horror literature, the rhetoric of horror should be deliberately moderated for audiences: "A book wholly constructed of the repellent may partially close the mind to the repellent"; such writing might therefore cause readers to develop a "psychological callus, a protective crust of insensitiveness."[82] To avoid such an outcome, Burke proposes an alternative method of engaging readers through the genre of horror: "Horrors strike deeper when they strike out of a sweet and gentle context. [. . .] And when they do strike, note how they strike: for one has been responding to the humanity of humans; one has been warmed; one presumably is aglow—and then of a sudden one sees these human concentration-points of courage and tenderness blasted into hell."[83]

Benson's *The Light Invisible* employs Burke's alternative. The beautiful descriptions of nature and the pleasant relationship between the priest and the

narrator in the first half of *The Light Invisible* become "blasted to hell" when the priest wrestles with death in the final chapters. However, this approach is essentially employed throughout Benson's individual stories as well. For example, Benson's "The Watcher" reveals a diabolic creature within beautiful and peaceful natural scenery; and "In the Convent" interrupts the peacefulness of prayer via supernatural terrors. Reciprocally, Benson also reverses the movement as well, shifting from abrasive horror to peaceful beauty. For example, in Benson's "The Bridge over the Stream," Death's face is described as "tender," "loving," and "smiling."[84] In "With Dyed Garments," the suffering of others leads to a man being more charitable as a Christian.

In this sense, Benson's use of opposites is classically dialectic. They promote Burke's competitive cooperation. The horror combats any naïve appeal to pleasure and delight and, instead, balances the tensions between the comforts and discomforts of super-nature. The "competition" between horror and beauty "cooperates" to craft compositional unity in the art, not necessarily conformity in readers. After all, the fiction can still be interpreted in various ways; it can also foster a range of feelings in readers who may either like or dislike such writing. In this way, Benson exhibits a dialectic between merger and division. Instead of naively generalizing super-nature only through a "merging strategy" of conformity, Benson's work recognizes that the realm of super-nature clashes or conflicts with the limited capacities of individuals as "symbol-using animals." As such, *The Light Invisible* provides these crucial moments of divergence as well as unity. The unifying terror found in those divergences connects readers to the fiction, to each other, and to super-nature itself.

"UNITY WITHOUT CONFORMITY"

As Hawhee points out, Burke's mysticism crucially offers an incongruous approach to all modes of knowledge construction: literary, artistic, political, and the everyday.[85] Although Burke is more attune to the political sphere than Benson, both writers emphasize social connectivity through super-nature's high abstraction. In *The War of Words*, Burke defines this rhetorical device as "spiritualization," a mode that can persuade others. However, as Benson reveals, the supernatural is not simply a socially constructed arena; rather, it is a domain where the grand reality spills over into perceived reality. Benson's fiction rhetorically acts as spiritualizing communication. His supernatural stories about mystical topics naturally emphasize high abstraction. The topics discussed by Benson—as well as the fiction itself—inclusively generalize the discussion so that his work ultimately affirms Burke's metaphor for

spiritualization where "the shoe is big enough to fit any foot" because it is "above every battle."[86] Benson's priest character articulates a version of this approach early in the book when he remarks that "spiritual perception" is a "gift . . . common to us all in our measure."[87]

However, as Burke recognizes, high abstraction can also present some dangers because it can be misused to thwart choice and/or manipulate other people. For example, Burke exposes a potential attitude of abstract defeatism when he writes: "there always have been wars and there always will be."[88] There are other potentially damaging consequences that can arise from disingenuous attempts to humanize super-nature. In this sense, if misused, spiritualization can function to promote an ideology of social conformity that undercuts the dignity of individuals as seen in cults and militant offshoots of organized religions. Yet despite such pitfalls and possible dangers, Benson's *The Light Invisible* reveals the positive potential of spiritualization in terms that resonate with Burke's ideal of social unity, where human beings merge the "*meum*" and "*tuum*" toward the "*nostrum*."[89] In other words, when used responsibly and constructively—and when insulated by the rhetoric of imaginative fiction—spiritualization can foster human togetherness that is fueled not by conformity but, instead, by shared dialectical inquiry into external truth.

Although readers of *The Light Invisible* are united by both the beauty and horror of mystic transcendence, the high abstraction of mysticism seems to resist conforming means of persuasion. To this end, the humble communication of supernatural occurrences can promote redistributions of uneven power dynamics. For example, in Benson's "Unto Babes," the villagers better understand the human dignity of a mentally challenged character through his divine encounter with God. In Benson's "Which Kings?," the haughty noble (Lord B) and the priest's friend (Lord A) are both humbled by the mysterious supernatural forces into cooperating with one another. Ultimately, Benson's stories often craft spiritual unity while still accounting for human difference and situational diversity.

To this end, *The Light Invisible* facilitates what Burke calls "unity without conformity."[90] And as scholars have pointed out, Burke's "unity without conformity" is fundamentally pluralistic[91]—and classically dialectical. After all, Burke explains that "unity without conformity" balances cooperation with competition.[92] Similarly, in *The Light Invisible* (and unlike his later *A Mirror of Shalott*), Benson hits the "water-line" between Anglicanism and Catholicism to facilitate such dialectical pluralism: one that acknowledges difference while rowing in the same direction. Benson's decision to hide the religious denomination of his mystically attuned priest character helps readers focus on the super-nature as a general unifying concept rather than distracting them with divisive incompatibilities. As has been outlined throughout

this chapter, the feeling of horror also affectively connects readers to the mystical content and to each other in a humanistic manner through shared literary experience. The shared feeling of horror alongside such pluralistic attitudes converges style and substance within Benson's literary rhetoric. In this way, Benson's *The Light Invisible* blends rhetoric with literature—and rhetoric with dialectics—in a markedly Burkean manner.

* * *

The next chapter will trace how Benson refines his wider Christian mystic approach into more fully into a distinctly Catholic philosophical/theological approach—specifically in his 1907 novel of short tales *A Mirror of Shalott*. Although he borrows some rhetorical and literary techniques from *The Light Invisible*, he integrates a more precise dialogic dialectic, rather than subtle dialectics of scene-act. In this way, the dialectics and the according Catholic attitude of "faith seeking understanding" are both more explicitly represented in the literature.

NOTES

1. Janet Grayson, *Robert Hugh Benson: Life and Works* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America), 146–47.
2. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 151.
3. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 224.
4. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 224.
5. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 49.
6. For his deepest exploration, look to Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970; originally published in 1961).
7. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 137–38.
8. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 138.
9. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 138.
10. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 138.
11. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 138.
12. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 138.
13. Robert H. Benson, *Confessions of a Convert* (London: Longmans, Green, 1913), 80.
14. R. H. Benson, *Confessions*, 79.
15. R. H. Benson, *Confessions*, 81.
16. R. H. Benson, *Confessions*, 82.
17. R. H. Benson, *Confessions*, 82.
18. R. H. Benson, *Confessions*, 52–53.
19. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), 304.

20. Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 13.

21. Raúl Rodríguez-Hernández and Claudia Schaefer, *The Supernatural Sublime: The Wondrous Ineffability of the Everyday in Films from Mexico and Spain* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2019), 19.

22. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime*, ed. David Womersley (New York: Penguin, 2004), 110.

23. Rodríguez-Hernández and Schaefer, *Supernatural Sublime*, 20.

24. Russell Kirk, "A Cautionary Note on the Ghostly Tale," in *Ancestral Shadows*, ed. Vigen Guroian (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 403.

25. Kirk, "Cautionary," 404.

26. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969; originally published in 1945), 50.

27. Lawrence Coupe, *Kenneth Burke on Myth: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 182.

28. Coupe, *Kenneth Burke on Myth*, 182.

29. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 296.

30. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 296.

31. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 299.

32. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 9.

33. Robert H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, in *The Supernatural Stories of Monsignor Robert H. Benson* (Landisville, PA: Coachwhip, 2010), 52.

34. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 53.

35. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 53.

36. Such as M. R. James's "Canon Alberic's Scrap-book," in *The Collected Ghost Stories of M. R. James* (London: Longmans, Green, 1931), 1–19; E. F. Benson's "Between the Lights," in *Night Terrors: The Ghost Stories of E. F. Benson* (Hertfordshire, UK: Wordsworth, 2012), 141–50; and A. C. Benson's "The Closed Window," in *Paul the Minstrel and Other Stories* (New York: Putnam, 1912), 348–62.

37. E. F. Benson, "Between the Lights," 142.

38. E. F. Benson, "Between the Lights," 150.

39. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 77.

40. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 77.

41. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 81.

42. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 3.

43. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 3.

44. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 6–7.

45. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 7.

46. Burke, *A Grammar of Motives*, 7.

47. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 12.

48. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 75.

49. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 110–11.

50. R. H. Benson is not particularly revolutionary here. Since the first Christian monastic orders, monastic communities balanced social community with solitary contemplation. This balance is revealed in *The Rule of St. Benedict*, the rule book of

the Order of Saint Benedict. This approach differs from earlier, more isolated mystical approaches of the Desert Fathers.

51. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 74.
52. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 74.
53. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 61.
54. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 62.
55. Debra Hawhee, *Moving Bodies: Kenneth Burke at the Edges of Language* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2009), 32.
56. For more on this dialectic, see Joshua Gunn, "An Occult Poetics, or, the Secret Rhetoric of Religion," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (2004): 37.
57. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 444–45.
58. Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 9.
59. Stephen Bygrave, *Kenneth Burke: Rhetoric and Ideology* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 49.
60. Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 40.
61. Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 40.
62. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 110–11.
63. Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 15.
64. Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 22.
65. Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 9–13.
66. Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action*, 457.
67. Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes toward History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984; originally published in 1937), 311.
68. Burke, *Attitudes toward History*, 312.
69. Robert H. Benson, *Spiritual Letters of Monsignor R. Hugh Benson to One of His Converts* (London: Longmans, Green, 1915), 79.
70. Hawhee, *Moving Bodies*, 33.
71. Hawhee, *Moving Bodies*, 31.
72. Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984; originally published in 1954), 222.
73. Hawhee, *Moving Bodies*, 53.
74. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 112.
75. Burke, *Permanence and Change*, 112.
76. Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968; originally published in 1931), 119.
77. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 96.
78. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 110.
79. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 110.
80. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 110.
81. Kenneth Burke, *The War of Words*, ed. Anthony Burke, Kyle Jensen, and Jack Selzer (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018), 98.
82. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 241.
83. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 241.
84. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 50.
85. Hawhee, *Moving Bodies*, 53.

86. Burke, *The War of Words*, 97.
87. R. H. Benson, *The Light Invisible*, 11–12.
88. Burke, *The War of Words*, 97.
89. Burke, *The War of Words*, 93.
90. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 312.
91. George Cheney, Kathy Garvin-Doxas, and Katheleen Torrens, "Kenneth Burke's Implicit Theory of Power," in *Kenneth Burke and the 21st Century*, ed. Bernard L. Brock (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 141.
92. Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 311–12.

Chapter 5

Rhetorical Dialectics of Robert Hugh Benson's *A Mirror of Shalott* (1907)

Notwithstanding Benson's productivity and literary popularity in the early 1900s, his corpus largely remains unexamined by scholars today.[1] His ghost stories can be overlooked—or when recognized, they can be dismissed as "too Catholic" or too religious.[2] In this "triumphal" spirit, he publicly celebrated Catholic converts such as John Henry Newman and the previously discussed J. K. Huysmans.[3] He also wrote an autobiographical book titled *Confessions of a Convert* about his own journey as a Catholic convert.[4] Even during his time, Benson's zeal for Catholic "triumphalism" made him unpopular in certain circles, including both Catholic and Anglican communities.[5] Despite such negative reactions, this chapter maintains that Benson's ghost stories deserve close attention as well-crafted—and explicitly Catholic—horror narratives. Upon investigation, these works feature a rich literary rhetoric and offer insights into the Theo-dramatic dimensions of Catholic storytelling.

Unlike *The Light Invisible*, the supernatural humanist novel of short stories that Benson wrote when he was still Anglican, the subsequent *A Mirror of Shalott* (1907) is at once a novel and a collection of distinctively Catholic supernatural tales. Its characters are almost all Catholic priests, but more important, the stories gesture to the Theo-drama while also engaging readers' participation in it. This chapter will trace this book's rhetorical machinery, showing how its stories dialectically escort readers away from limited verifiable knowledge (*gnosis*) into wider spaces of metaphysical wonder. In other words, *A Mirror of Shalott* rhetorically steers readers' imaginations away from what Benson calls "this-worldliness." In deflecting readers away from worldly presence, *A Mirror of Shalott* highlights the discomforts of worldly absence by narrating uncomfortable supernatural experiences. By putting Benson's work in conversation with Catholic theologian Hans Urs von

Balthasar and Pope Benedict XVI, the chapter ultimately argues that *A Mirror of Shalott* is particularly apt at dramatizing *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding). With this emphasis, Benson's text inspires unique and complex theological attitudes in readers.

A MIRROR OF SHALOTT

Similar to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, *A Mirror of Shalott* houses thirteen short stories within a larger narrative framework. In the case of Benson's text, assorted Catholic priests recount their personal experiences of weird or unexplainable supernatural events while attending/holding an "unprofessional symposium" at the Canadian College in Rome. In a way, the symposium resembles the "tavern" where pilgrims gather in *The Canterbury Tales*, for it provides a setting for storytelling that stitches the individual tales together. Each story of the novel subtly differs in style, length, and content to reflect each unique member of the group. This diversity reflects different supernatural experiences from around the globe as well as each storyteller's varying degrees of skepticism about their supernatural experiences.

The stories offer a range of supernatural occurrences. For example, several stories address spiritual warfare and possession by depicting a range of scenarios involving otherworldly phenomena: Father Meuron recalls a vivid exorcism; Father Rector tells a story of a man kept alive by evil who finally weakens and dies only after he confesses his sins; Father Martin tells of an evil, ghostly presence who tries to deter him from attending to a dying woman; and Monsignor Maxwell relates a tale of "mystical substitution" where a man takes on the temptations of another person and becomes possessed in the process. These tales more directly explore Catholic themes, while other stories merely gesture to unknown phenomena. For instance, Father Brent tells a story about phantom ships sailing at night; and Benson, as a character in his own book, tells a tale of a haunted house that assaults visitors with heavy feelings of despair. Much like *The Light Invisible*, the stories provide unique angles of vision into various types of supernatural phenomena.

In *A Mirror of Shalott*'s prologue, the priests agree that sharing supernatural tales is a valuable endeavor. Each priest agrees to tell one tale from his own experience during the symposium. The tales are not meant merely to entertain as the prologue makes clear. Rather, the stories seem to serve several purposes that resemble the three classical offices of rhetoric: to delight, to inform, and to move.[6] In telling these stories, the priests seek to entertain themselves and the reader alike. They also aim to help both members of their own group (and the reader) better understand metaphysical phenomena and

connect supernatural experiences to the Truth. In the prologue, the characters concede that there is "no guarantee that the translation [of each spiritual encounter] is adequate"; however, they stipulate that each tale should still "satisfy" that "the evidence is good or bad."[7] Moreover, they establish that each listener should keep their personal evaluations to themselves.[8] In other words, when the priests listen to the stories, they are urged to discern the accuracy of each one while also refraining from deliberation until the end of the symposium. Benson, as author, places readers in a similar situation. In presenting these tales within a fictional consensus-driven symposium, Benson indirectly urges readers to suspend judgment of the supernatural phenomena until the completion of the book. As outside witnesses of the symposium, readers encounter all the tales as "evidence" before making larger assessments about supernatural reality. This suspended judgment is a rhetorical benefit of the storytelling. As Father Martin expresses before relating his tale, storytelling helps audiences practice the "art of believing," cultivating a disposition where the temporary suspension of judgment does no harm.[9] Furthermore, the art of believing is affirmative, for it guides the truth-seeking process while also sparking debate and deliberative consensus after a story is told in a public setting. Accordingly, Benson represents this public deliberative consensus in the final chapter of *A Mirror Shalott*. In the final chapter, the priests deliberate about how supernatural phenomena relate to the deposit of Faith.

Benson importantly calls attention to the act of storytelling in the work by relating each story to one another. While he supplies all the tales, he also situates each one in a particular moment in time at the symposium. He also describes the actions of individual storytellers, noting when they make certain gestures, shift their sitting positions, light tobacco pipes, and so forth. Additionally, he highlights the speakers' manner of delivery itself, describing their inflection, intonation, and pacing. By including these details, Benson emphasizes the coherence of the tales while also accounting for specificities in location, culture, experience, and storytelling technique. In this way, *A Mirror of Shalott* works dialectically. It balances merger/unity (pursuit of truth) with division/plurality (individual diversities). Although *A Mirror of Shalott* presents a range of stories about different supernatural experiences, it pursues a united, overarching quest for truth among different parties.

The dialectical pursuit of truth fuels the symposium of *A Mirror of Shalott*—much like it fuels Catholic philosophy and theology. In this way, *A Mirror of Shalott* reads as a more explicitly Catholic text than *The Light Invisible* because it prominently features dialectics. Still, *A Mirror of Shalott*'s artful storytelling does not merely catechistically echo doctrine. Benson's work was rhetorically mindful of a diverse readership, which may be why it appealed to both Catholics and non-Catholics. After all, Benson was not only a Catholic

priest, but he was also personally familiar with multiple perspectives outside of Catholicism. He understood a range of religious, antireligious, and spiritual positions that countered Catholicism. For example, Benson himself was born and raised Anglican before he converted to Catholicism in 1903. He also had several friends from Cambridge who could be described as pagan eccentrics; in fact, one of his closest (and most sinister) friends even created his very own freemasonic society.[10] While Benson was a committed Christian then, he was also well acquainted with counter-Christian lifestyles. More generally, he was also familiar with the increasingly popular spiritual traditions and trends of the time. Benson had an enduring interest in the ambiguities of the spiritual realm, and he was particularly fascinated by old-fashioned ghost stories and hauntings. In fact, he often sought out opportunities to encounter what people experienced as "ghosts" to better understand the experiences; so, he occasionally stayed in haunted houses and slept in rooms of the recently deceased.[11] Benson, however, never encountered any supernatural entities.[12] In addition to showing interest in ghosts, Benson also briefly explored Swedenborgianism and theosophy[13] when he was at Cambridge, but he never became an official follower of these movements.[14]

Benson's exposure to diverse perspectives helped him address the shifting historical moment and recognize that the world was in flux. In the early 1900s, many disillusioned Christians conflated Christian spirituality with the occult and séance-driven spiritualism.[15] Around Benson's time, lapsed Catholic believers often turned to these realms, and English Protestants who became bored with their religion looked to theosophy and spiritualism for mystical knowledge.[16] Refuting or transfiguring many Christian beliefs, both spiritualism and theosophy quickly gained popularity.[17] Offering more philosophical sophistication than spiritualism, theosophy (which had fragmented into several sects by Benson's time), quickly became the "New Age" of the times.[18] Benson saw these trends as either trickery or genuinely evil because spiritualism and theosophy espoused spiritual power to probe dimensions, which, Catholics deem, are closed off by God;[19] moreover, spiritualists sought to fulfill individual desires (such as séances where participants sought to speak with deceased loved ones). He deemed the sects to be extremely dangerous, and consequently, he zealously spoke out against them.[20] In fact, Benson advocated that the church actively send disguised priests into spiritualist séances to help expose and dismantle the dangerous events.[21] He voiced this perspective more fully in his novel *The Necromancers*, which Benson published in 1909, two years after *A Mirror of Shalott*.

SACRAMENTAL STORYTELLING

Fides quaerens intellectum (faith seeking understanding)—a phrase most well known from Augustine's *De Trinitate*[22] (15.2) and Anselm of Canterbury's *Proslogion*[23]—fuels *A Mirror of Shalott* as a distinctive type of Catholic literary rhetoric. Yet, to some critics, this attitude seems like an unusual dimension of horror fiction. After all, why should a writer of ghost stories—storytelling that often aims to entertain—seek to teach audiences about Catholic faith via the stories? In the 1983 *Guide to Supernatural Fiction*, Everett F. Bleiler finds it "curious" that Benson should use supernatural tales "to provide little homilies."[24] And he honestly wonders if Benson was deliberately trying to "create a sectarian version of the ghost story."[25] This critique may suggest that Benson was heavy-handed when integrating Catholic principles into *A Mirror of Shalott*; yet this is not necessarily the case. Apart from the stories that illustrate priestly interactions and vocational practice (by referencing Catholic doctrine, occasional Latin phrases, confession, and the mass), Benson's fiction offers quite nuanced explorations of Catholic spirituality.

And yet, Benson would have surely agreed with Bleiler's point, affirming that he did indeed compose sectarian ghost stories. Benson, however, would have also likely asserted that his sectarian approach does not undercut the value of the fiction. Benson admitted that Catholicism informs all his fiction, but he did not see himself as being particularly different from any other writer. He recognized that other writers tell slanted stories as well.[26] He pointed out that all novelists try to influence public opinion by encouraging readers to see value in particular ideological perspectives, whether Marxism, capitalism, patriotism, nihilism, or others; Benson acknowledged that he pursued this goal as well—just using a Catholic perspective.[27]

As observed by Benson scholar Janet Grayson, Benson saw Catholic literature as sacramental—that is, as an outward-facing vehicle gesturing toward truth.[28] According to Benson, the writer's task is to discern inner and invisible mysteries and reveal them outwardly through the appropriately persuasive signs.[29] In this way, ideas can sink into readers' imaginations and be absorbed.[30] Benson certainly recognized that a range of readers would be exposed to his writing; therefore, he sought to rhetorically accommodate readers. He realized that divine truths may not be understood by readers who were averse to or unfamiliar with Christianity and Catholicism, so he explored such truths in humanistic scenes that would appeal to audiences instead of alienating them.[31] He additionally realized that abstract ideas are not as persuasive as concrete images so he used specific and engaging scenarios to help plant ideas in readers' imaginations.[32] Through *A Mirror of Shalott*'s ghost stories, Benson shaped abstract principles about metaphysics—like "faith

seeking understanding"—into concrete, memorable images to make such ideas interesting and comprehensible to audiences.

Benson was a versatile author who could write in a range of genres. Still, he found ghost stories to be compelling sacramentals. *A Mirror of Shalott*'s prologue provides an explicit meta-commentary on this narrative approach. In the book's prologue, readers find the priests arguing about how ghost stories cooperate with the Faith. Through this early dialogue, readers quickly understand how Benson, as a Roman Catholic priest, may be justified in writing these types of horror stories. In this introduction, Monsignor Maxwell admits that ghost stories can be "fraudulent or hysterical," but he also recognizes that there are "a good many others" lying outside these negative categories.[33] In this way, the priests agree that they should honor "the value of human evidence" in the ghost stories at the symposium.[34] Monsignor Maxwell acknowledges transcendent dimensions as well, and he adds that the spiritual world works "in another mode" from the material world.[35] Even in their roles as priests, they admit that they do not actually know much about the spiritual world "except those few main principles which are called the Catholic Faith." Therefore, their anecdotes about supernatural occurrences can offer "little glimpses" into the vast spiritual world.[36] Later in the prologue, the monsignor proclaims that he has full confidence in dogmatic theology but also "respect[s] the limits which it itself has laid down."[37] Given this view, he is agnostic to everything outside of the Faith and mathematics.[38] Ghost stories, he claims, are valuable because they seek to translate the supernatural world into natural terms and vice versa.[39] He explains that, unlike the stability found in the Faith, ghost stories "have no sort of guarantee that the translation [of the supernatural] is adequate, or that we are adequate to understand it."[40] Rather, such stories spark the natural human desire to know and discern the truth, while also prompting readers to acknowledge epistemological limitations with humility.

THE ROLE OF LITERATURE

The rhetoric of literature plays an important role in *A Mirror of Shalott* when escorting readers into the text and inspiring active *fides quaerens intellectum* in readers. Hans Urs von Balthasar's rich perspectives about the Theo-drama, specifically traced in *Prolegomena*, the first volume of his *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, can help inform how Benson's literature works rhetorically.

As previously mentioned, Monsignor Benson composed sacramentals with his writing. His fiction conveys *Logos*, but it also can inspire readers to revere the *Logos*. In this way, *A Mirror of Shalott* behaves rhetorically. The literature

can spark individual dramatic actions within the larger Theo-dramatic scheme traced by Balthasar. This tiered dramatic architecture acts much like the layers of an onion, for it involves a series of nested dramas within the larger Theo-drama. As Balthasar outlines, God "has already taken the drama of existence which plays on the world stage and inserted it into his quite different 'play' which, nonetheless, he wishes to play on our stage. It is a case of the play within the play: our play 'plays' in his play."[41] In addition to the human drama that unfolds within the Theo-drama, literary artifacts contribute to the Theo-drama as well. The literature or "plays" that are created by human beings offer supplementary dramatic layers. In this way, Benson's literature behaves as a dramatic layering of "plays within a play." And, of course, because his fictional characters tell stories or "plays" within the novel itself, another dramatic layer is offered in Benson's *A Mirror of Shalott*.

In sum, *A Mirror of Shalott*'s fiction lives within a worldly play that lives within the Theo-dramatic play. To this end, Benson's supernatural literature offers at least three dramatic functions: it participates in the Theo-drama itself, gestures to the wider Theo-drama, and steers readers toward the Theo-drama. In this way, *A Mirror of Shalott*'s dramatic functions loosely align with three basic elements found in Aristotle's foundational communication triangle: author, reality, and audience (*Rhetoric* 1356a).[42] The fiction is composed by the author Benson; the fiction itself represents/consults reality; and the fiction extends outwardly toward readers. Each equally fuels the Theo-dramatic machinery of *A Mirror of Shalott*.

These tiered "plays" can also be further understood as "dreams." As Balthasar notes, the premise that "life's a dream" can prompt contemplation of transcendent reality.[43] Literature is also a type of dream, a fictional dream offered within the dream called life. Benson's supernatural fiction emphasizes this dreaminess of life in respect to the larger mystery of the transcendental reality. This "dreaminess" is specifically referenced in *A Mirror of Shalott*. In "My Own Tale," Benson (as a character) refers to the "very dreamy class of phenomena, named 'haunted houses,' . . . that do not include an actual ghost."[44] In the story, the character of Benson deems haunted houses as "dreamy" not because he or the other characters find material evidence of a ghost but, rather, because a surreal feeling washes over them when visiting a particular eerie house. This unknown dreaminess pervades other tales as well despite never being explicitly named. In this way, Benson's stories about supernatural phenomena draw attention to the dreaminess of the material realm in respect to the mysteries of the grand Theo-drama. This unfolding cooperative competition is fundamentally dialectical in nature.

A Mirror of Shalott demonstrates that Benson very much aligns his perspective with a creative sentiment felt by Balthasar. For Balthasar, the "world of the dream" should cooperate with the Truth. But the creative allowances

afforded by writers—and rhetoricians—may seem problematic when dreaming up fictional worlds to communicate Truth. As Socrates points out in Plato's *Phaedrus*, it can be tempting for writers to confuse "waking visions" for "sleeping dreams" when communicating philosophical concepts, especially when audiences praise such behavior.[45] Still, Catholic writers do not need to feel guilty about the cooperation of fiction and Truth. According to Balthasar, writers' calls for grace assist in these efforts at discernment.[46] For Balthasar, literary artistry does not necessarily secularize theological concepts.[47] He claims that imaginative authors charismatically participate in an ecclesial reality and, therefore, carry out a vocation in the church.[48] In short, Balthasar's ideal literary writer is a "steward and depository of truth, for the sake of others" whose subject matter transcends mere "moods of the self."[49]

This distinction is supported throughout Benson's personal correspondence. In his letters, he gives advice about imagination and discernment. For example, in a letter to a friend, Benson cautions against directing the imagination toward worldly idols; instead, he prescribes that the spiritual imagination operate as follows:

> I conjecture also that you have enervated and weakened your spiritual and mental life by day-dreaming instead of strengthening it by meditation. . . . Somewhere or other in your imagination you have got an idol—perhaps it is the idol of a scheme-of-life. . . . And in your solitude you have been worshipping it with all your might. You must knock that idol down, and never go near the pieces again.[50]

As a writer of fiction, Benson appreciates the role of the imagination, but he respects its limits in regard to the Theo-drama. Benson takes his own advice in *A Mirror of Shalott*. Rather than merely representing fleeting "idols" and "schemes of life" with his ghost stories, he guides readers' "dreaminess" toward meditative attitudes about what metaphysically "is" (*Logos*) and what "ought to be" (the Good).

PERFORMATIVITY

Benson's *A Mirror of Shalott* inspires readers to meditate upon the Theo-drama in respect to the Good. In this way, the fiction highlights active theological thinking. Consequently, *A Mirror of Shalott* sparks individual dramatic action within a larger Theo-drama. The stories do not tell readers what to do; rather, they display narrative dramas wherein readers can dramatically participate through reading, thinking, and acting in a theological manner. This approach aligns with Balthasar's comments about the dramatic mode: "The

action is not narrated; it takes place along with and in the words" and therein facilitates a logic "directed by the course of action."[51] This dramatic dimension allows readers to share in the "good" through the sheer act of reading the stories. Balthasar further explains, "The *good* which God does to us can only be experienced as the *truth* if we share in *performing* it."[52] In this way, Benson's sacramental *A Mirror of Shalott* works both rhetorically and performatively. Balthasar proposes that a good is found in action and getting something done, not in the contemplation of pure aesthetics or in demonstrations of logic.[53] Through *A Mirror of Shalott*'s fictional symposium and individual stories themselves, Benson shows that "faith seeking understanding" is an active process; and the narrative itself pulls the reader into that active process by engaging the literary imagination. In this way, the stories allow readers to "share in performing in the truth" through their imaginations with the goal that they continue to perform that practice in their daily lives once they reemerge from the fictional world of the text.

Toward the end of *Prolegomena*, Balthasar explains not only that the "dramatic" involves the "struggle for the Good" but also that, more broadly, drama concerns change.[54] This change can involve individuals themselves or the environments in which individuals find themselves.[55] However, while the ideal aim of decision-making pursues "the Good," he reveals how the Good can indeed be actualized on Earth. According to Balthasar, existence must naturally unfold a type of faith, and such undertaking will eventually "see" a "solution" that will satiate us.[56] In other words, life's drama should not simply be an imitation of material life plagued with unresolved problems. Despite seeing life "as it is," Balthasar clarifies that "the drama must also show how it ought to be and why it appears in such a way, or why things are not as they seem."[57] To this end, theological thinking looks to better understand the Theo-drama so to better participate in it. Accordingly, theology-minded literature can illustrate "faith seeking understanding" to better participate in the Theo-drama. By engaging with such literature, readers can internalize a similar mission.

A Mirror of Shalott explicitly represents this movement within its stories. For example, Father Girdlestone's tale clearly illustrates engagement with the Theo-drama, specifically portraying a dialectical tension between *Logos* and anti-*Logos*. As the longest tale in the book, the story is parsed into three sections. Father Girdlestone traces his inspiration to build a magnificent church on land that overlooks a lake, but then suddenly falls into a mysterious "cloud of infidelity."[58] Within this strange despair, the priest sees himself "as a dying spark in a burning-out world." In this world, the text adds, "there was no escape, for there was nothing but empty space . . . no God, no heaven, not even a devil to hint at life in some form at least after death."[59] Girdlestone tries to describe this nihilism within his story but fully admits that he cannot

put it into words. He says that the nothingness that he experienced overshadows the intellect,[60] and he claims that language is "very useless" when trying to describe this abyss.[61] The nothingness that Girdlestone felt drove him solely into "the world of sense," and for two months, it caused him to abandon any interiority.[62] His prayers became powerless; he stopped seeking God. Yet, the despair finally disappeared; Father Girdlestone's faithful interiority returned after he encountered a "battlefield"[63] of "two vast forces"[64] that essentially took place outside of himself. However, the battle was not a Manichean struggle between material darkness and spiritual light but, instead, a contest between anti-*Logos* and *Logos*. He felt these two opposing forces beyond his physical reality. While Father Girdlestone experienced the nihilistic anti-*Logos* as "horror," he felt the return of the "life-giving" "Presence of the Lord" as "a strange sweetness, so sweet and so dear that we forget it as the very air we breathe."[65]

Ultimately, in his story, Father Girdlestone reveals how he reconnects with the Theo-drama. As such, Benson's story highlights how intimate introspection can lead to faithful performativity: Father Girdlestone becomes contemplatively active through his prayers; he becomes materially active in planning and building of the church. Both activities happen alongside—and within—the overarching Theo-drama that unfolds outside of these actions. In addition, Benson pits each of these pious actions against bouts of negative inaction (nihilism, despair, and anti-*Logos*) to dialectically illustrate the omnipotence of the *Logos* and the dramatic struggle for the Good.

The narrative arts—as displayed by Father Girdlestone's storytelling (as a character) and Benson's storytelling (as the author)—play an important role in directing audience performance within the Theo-drama. Pope Benedict XVI offers a similar perspective in his 2007 *Spe Salvi* encyclical. Benedict explains that stories do not only communicate information to readers, but they also spark performativity in readers.[66] Benedict buttresses his position by gesturing to scripture, stating, "the Gospel is not merely a communication of things that can be known—it is one that makes things happen and is life-changing. The dark door of time, of the future, has been thrown open. The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life."[67] As demonstrated by Benson, narrative arts can be rhetorical as well as instructional. Although Benson's stories cannot be equated to scripture, the rhetorical dimensions of both discourses operate similarly, for they gesture to the wider Reality and offer hope. *A Mirror of Shalott*, a narrative product of Benson's writing performance, guides and inspires readers to perform theologically.

CATHOLIC AGNOSTICISM

Finally, Catholic "agnosticism" fuels the rhetorical dialectics of *A Mirror of Shalott*. Clearly, the priests do not extend their agnostic positions to God, since belief in God is an ongoing act that is central to the deposit of Faith and that connects them to reality; and yet the priests also acknowledge that reality subsumes what they do *not* know. This type of faithful agnosticism is foundational to Catholic theological thinking. Using ghost stories as literary rhetoric, *A Mirror of Shalott* immerses readers in this theological attitude—even if only for the duration of the read.

"Agnosticism" is rooted in two Greek words: "*a*" and "*gnosis*." The prefix "*a*" simply signifies "not"; "*gnosis*" signifies "certain knowledge." This absence of full knowledge fuels Catholic theology. For example, in *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger at the time) specifically discusses the dangers of *gnosis*. Although he does not use the word "agnostic" in the discussion, he explains how *gnosis* undermines faith, philosophy, and, by extension, theology, because as a form of totalizing certain knowledge, it closes down active questioning.[68] *Gnosis*, he maintains, is therefore the "negation of philosophy."[69] It undercuts healthy philosophical inquiry. In this philosophical arena, to some degree, every question "always remains a question" that "awaits an answer."[70] Seeking to know while acknowledging the limits of knowledge, the agnostic attitude therefore negates the negation of philosophy.

Naturally, philosophy does not need to operate alone. Faith acts as a theological counterpart of philosophy in challenging the notion of a totalizing *gnosis*. Benedict explains that faith "defends the grandeur and misery of philosophy [. . .] against the total claim of *gnosis*."[71] Philosophy relies on faith because it "needs man who questions and seeks."[72] Since theology encompasses the realms of both philosophy and faith, *gnosis* interferes with theological mission by extension. As a liberal art, philosophy seeks open space to question, whereas overspecialization suffocates such space.[73] Faith cooperates with the intellectual objectives of philosophy since it engages reason, stimulates wonder, and allows questioning to flourish.

As literary representation, *A Mirror of Shalott* also provides a space that inspires theological and philosophical questioning. Encouraging readers to engage in these forms of inquiry for themselves, Benson deliberately engineers his text to thwart any totalizing sense of *gnosis*. For example, the book's introductory and concluding chapters feature discussions of agnosticism, and the stories themselves are often characterized by a conspicuous lack of closure. In this way, Benson's text communicates the importance of faith and philosophy. Some of the book's tales speculate about supernatural

phenomena; however, other times characters merely recount their experiences without offering any speculation. In short, Benson's *A Mirror of Shalott* provides an open arena for readers to use their imaginations in contemplating on open metaphysical questions. The text moves readers outside of material possibilities without providing closure. Benson crafts this openness by developing a literary narrative that not only joins agnosticism and faith but also merges acts of imagination with truth seeking. By emphasizing the relationships between these elements, Benson immerses readers into "faith seeking understanding."

In the final chapter of *A Mirror of Shalott*, the priests revisit the introductory discussion of agnosticism. As such, the final chapter offers an important companion piece to the prologue, for here, too, the priests step back from the individual tales to dialectically discuss broader theological and philosophical implications. The priests consider if their perspectives have changed after hearing supernatural stories from their colleagues. Yet, they declare that nothing has changed, and the priests affirm the same line of reasoning articulated in the prologue. They maintain that agnosticism remains the soundest position in respect to everything outside of "the deposit of faith"; they find themselves in the exact same position that they were in at the beginning.[74]

Ultimately, this concluding insight connects to broader questions about truth-seeking conversation and reality. The priests' reaffirmation of their initial position exhibits an important point about social consensus in the search for truth, a point made by Pope Benedict XVI. In *The Nature and Mission of Theology*, he writes, "the Greater [thinkers'] inner contact with the one reality which unites them, namely, the truth, the greater their capacity to meet on common ground."[75] Consequently, thinkers do not invent truths *ex nihilo* (from nothing) in isolation; but rather, they participate in the broader unity of knowledge. He continues, stating: "dialogue without this interior obedient listening to the truth would be nothing more than a discussion among the deaf."[76] Therefore, consensus should not be a "substitute for the truth"[77] based solely on utility or convenience; rather, the search for truth and the associated dialectical process should lead to consensus naturally through shared discovery. To this end, the dialectical process must always continue onward to refine the understanding of objective reality—and, thus, refine the common ground.

A Mirror of Shalott enacts the process that Benedict describes. In *A Mirror of Shalott*, the priests fulfill the objective of "listening to the truth" when they humbly concede to know that they do not know. That realization is the "inner contact with the one reality." Consequently, continued reliance on Faith becomes the common ground. *A Mirror of Shalott* illustrates that human beings can engage socially to seek Truth, but Truth itself is not socially constructed. As such, *A Mirror of Shalott* portrays a dialectical discussion that is not only constituted by social awareness but also fueled by "faith seeking

understanding." And this discussion extends to readers as well, guiding them to follow their own paths of theological and philosophical questioning.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As this chapter shows, *A Mirror of Shalott* gestures to the Theo-drama—and acts as drama itself by emphasizing internal and external participation in it. Therefore, in its own way, *A Mirror of Shalott* offers a caveat against becoming too imaginatively attached to the world. This sentiment was profoundly important to Benson. As mentioned in the previous chapter, in personal correspondence to a friend, Benson cautions against "This-Worldliness" and the habit of "indulging . . . imagination recklessly in plans for this world."[78] He advises his friend to "wretch [himself] free, continuously and brutally, from all the material points . . . interiorly and exteriorly—always and everywhere."[79] Benson's supernatural fiction similarly emphasizes the importance and value of absence especially as it extends to knowledge. His work thus promotes absence of "This-Worldliness," absence of *gnosis*, and a faithful embrace of not fully knowing. But it also includes the absence of life and health. As Grayson points out, Benson did not shy away from stories that address death and dying,[80] especially in *The Light Invisible* and *A Mirror of Shalott*. In both novels, Benson illustrates various accounts of suffering, especially through portrayals of characters who undergo internal turmoil. By extension, these tales transport readers into intimate conflicts that shape the self/human subjectivity. As already mentioned, Benson illustrates this conflicted nothingness in "Father Girdlestone's Tale" and "My Own Tale." But he also depicts absence of physical and spiritual health throughout his stories as well. This absence is also highlighted in various tales throughout *A Mirror of Shalott*, including "Father Rector's Tale," "Father Martin's Tale," "Mr. Bosanquet's Tale," and "Monsignor Maxwell's Tale."

Death, sickness, and discomfort—that is, the absence of life, health, and ease/contentment—serve rhetorical functions in Benson's work. Since life, health, and comfort connect to "This-Worldliness," negating each of these elements potentially directs attention away from the trappings of earthly life and instead encourages a more faithful and Theo-dramatic imagination. The uncomfortable topics propel theological engagement—that is, faith seeking understanding.

As Pope Benedict XVI has shown, pondering death can motivate theological inquiry. Human mortality, he writes, is "a metaphysical thorn lodged in man's being."[81] For Benedict, philosophy is the pursuit for meaning "in the face of death." Christianity takes up a similar search, but its ultimate object is the truth to be found in Christ.[82] Therefore, Christianity draws on

philosophical thinking but supplements its aims and methods with the habit of faith. While Christianity joins philosophy in contemplating death, it directs such contemplation toward hope for salvation and fulfillment in Christ.

The consideration of the final limit of death inevitably propels human beings into pondering metaphysical questions, including ontological origins and ends and the nature of faith. According to Benedict, faith helps establish "man's being in the whole of reality." It is therefore a virtue that ultimately inspires a sense of wonder.[83] Consequently, both philosophy and theology, which share in the rhetorical exploration of human mortality, become the navigational equipment that drives toward truth. In short, stories that represent death and dying—fitting subject matter of the supernatural horror genre—also engage this rhetorical work in a distinctive imaginative idiom. If rhetorically mindful, such narratives can open up avenues of philosophical and theological contemplation, enacting a mode of faith seeking understanding.

A Mirror of Shalott models such rhetorically mindful work, and its focus on death and suffering is therefore justified as a part of a larger ethically oriented method of inquiry. More broadly, Benson's stories evidence how the horror genre, which characteristically illustrates these "final limits," can aptly house both philosophical inquiry and theological inquiry. After all, the English word "horror" can be traced to the Latin word *horrere*, which means to dread or bristle. Since death and suffering are commonly dreaded experiences that human beings bristle against, discomfort is often a byproduct of broaching these topics. Known for producing discomfort in audiences, the horror genre develops its own theological frameworks for reflecting on suffering, death, and the realm of the supernatural.

Benson's *A Mirror of Shalott* demonstrates how literature can prompt readers into "theological action." His work more specifically shows how Catholic horror tales can offer fertile soil to grow theological contemplation beyond *gnosis*. To this end, supernatural horror fiction remains distinctive when compared to other related narrative modes. For example, although supernatural horror fiction can sometimes overlap with fantasy fiction, its rhetorical operations slightly differ. Fantasy fiction offers a representational simulation—that is, a representative imaginative sphere—where audiences understand that fantastic settings, characters, and plots do not actually exist. Of course, this understanding does not undercut the power and value of the genre. Readers can be equally moved and instructed by Christian fantasy narratives, such as those of J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, or Gene Wolfe. After all, these works offer valuable Christian themes, concepts, and morals that theologically and dramatically engage readers. Ghost stories, on the other hand, seek to represent reality more explicitly; the narrative's "drama" or "dream" does not unfold in a fantastic realm or "fairyland." Rather, as evidenced by *A Mirror of Shalott*, such stories are told as if they are real; the supernatural pervades

Earthly occasions and times. Therefore, the text highlights an operative *Logos* and a performative Good within a sphere that is familiar and known to the audience. Although fictional and representational, ghost stories directly emphasize the transcendental reality.[84] As such, Benson's supernatural horror tales are balanced in a middle position. They resist being too materialistic (unimaginative) while also avoiding flights of fancy (overly imaginative). Instead, they offer a creative Catholic rhetoric that promotes serious theological meditation and spiritual contemplation. In this way, Benson's *A Mirror of Shalott* provides a valuable model of Theo-dramatic storytelling—and a model of rhetorical dialectics.

NOTES

1. Joseph Pearce, *Literary Giants, Literary Catholics* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 2005), 138.

2. Jack Sullivan, ed., *Penguin Encyclopedia of Horror and the Supernatural* (New York: Viking, 1986), 29.

3. Joseph Pearce, *Literary Converts* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1999), 75.

4. Robert H. Benson, *Confessions of a Convert* (London: Longmans, Green, 1913).

5. Pearce, *Literary Converts*, 75.

6. As promoted by classical rhetoricians such as Cicero and Augustine of Hippo.

7. Janet Grayson, *Robert Hugh Benson: Life and Works* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America), 119.

8. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 119.

9. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 202.

10. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 81–84.

11. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 138.

12. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 138.

13. Nineteenth-century theosophy contended that knowledge of divine wisdom gives people access to the mysteries of nature and inner essence of humankind. Accordingly, it held the possibility that the living can contact the dead. Swedenborgianism is a Christian sect that bases its tenets off of Emmanuel Swedenborg, an eighteenth-century mystic who documented his own personal connection between the spiritual world and the natural world—specifically, his experience of heaven and hell.

14. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 136.

15. As a school of spirituality, spiritualism held the belief that incorporeal spirits (such as the dead) can make themselves known to or can communicate with living human beings, often through a medium (*Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "spiritualism, n.," accessed July 2023, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/spiritualism_n).

16. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 136.

17. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 136.

18. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 136.

19. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 137.

20. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 137.
21. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 137.
22. Augustine, *On the Trinity, Books 8–15*, ed. Gareth B. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 168.
23. Anselm, *Proslogion*, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, eds. Brian Davies and G. R Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 88.
24. Everett F. Bleiler, *The Guide to Supernatural Fiction* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1983), 43.
25. Bleiler, *The Guide to Supernatural Fiction*, 43.
26. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 142.
27. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 142.
28. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 142.
29. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 142.
30. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 142.
31. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 141.
32. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 141.
33. Robert H. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, in *The Supernatural Stories of Monsignor Robert H. Benson* (Landisville, PA: Coachwhip, 2010), 115–16.
34. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 116.
35. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 118.
36. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 116.
37. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 118.
38. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 118.
39. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 118.
40. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 118–19.
41. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 1, *Prolegomena*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1988), 20.
42. Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. J. H. Freese (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 17.
43. Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 648.
44. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 249.
45. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Stephen Scully (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2003), 69.
46. Aidan Nichols, *Divine Fruitfulness: A Guide through Balthasar's Theology beyond the Trilogy* (London: T&T Clark, 2007), 296–97.
47. Nichols, *Divine Fruitfulness*, 297.
48. Nichols, *Divine Fruitfulness*, 297.
49. Nichols, *Divine Fruitfulness*, 297.
50. Robert H. Benson, *Spiritual Letters of Monsignor R. Hugh Benson to One of His Converts* (London: Longmans, Green, 1915), 80.
51. Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 17.
52. Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 20. He is referring to John 7:17 as well.
53. Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 19.
54. Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 413.
55. Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 413.
56. Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 260.

57. Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 262.
58. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 170.
59. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 171.
60. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 171.
61. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 181.
62. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 171–72.
63. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 179.
64. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 183.
65. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 184. In fact, Benson's illustration of Father Girdlestone telling the story mirrors these two feelings. His voice nervously shakes when discussing the horrors of the nihilism (173). When narrating the climax of the story about the spiritual assault, the priest's pipe falls out of his mouth onto the floor with a sharp sound, and he does not pick it up (182). And once he reveals that his Faith was reinstated and he actually built the church at the lake, he stands up and smiles (185).
66. Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, para. 2, Vatican, November 30, 2007, accessed April 17, 2021, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_benxvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html.
67. Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi*, para. 2.
68. Joseph C. Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1995), 28.
69. Ratzinger, *Nature and Mission of Theology*, 28.
70. Ratzinger, *Nature and Mission of Theology*, 28.
71. Ratzinger, *Nature and Mission of Theology*, 28–29.
72. Ratzinger, *Nature and Mission of Theology*, 29.
73. Ratzinger, *Nature and Mission of Theology*, 29.
74. Benson, *A Mirror of Shalott*, 257.
75. Ratzinger, *Nature and Mission of Theology*, 34.
76. Ratzinger, *Nature and Mission of Theology*, 34.
77. Ratzinger, *Nature and Mission of Theology*, 34.
78. Benson, *Spiritual Letters*, 78–79.
79. Benson, *Spiritual Letters*, 79.
80. Grayson, *Benson: Life and Works*, 185.
81. Ratzinger, *Nature and Mission of Theology*, 23.
82. Ratzinger, *Nature and Mission of Theology*, 14.
83. Ratzinger, *Nature and Mission of Theology*, 23.
84. Hans Urs von Balthasar highlights ghost stories in his examples of literature to emphasize the value of death within the workings of drama. See Balthasar, *Theo-drama*, 380.

Chapter 6

Rhetorical Dialectics of William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1971)

In 1963, William Peter Blatty, a Roman Catholic screenwriter of comedy at the time, solidified a rough idea for a novel. As he explains in his autobiography, he was inspired by documented possession cases. He looked to write a novel that, unlike his previous comedies, explored how "undisputed paranormal phenomena" affected an atheist mother and a "priest of weak faith" who carried out an exorcism; he sought to explore themes of the "mystery of goodness" and self-sacrifice within these representations.[1] His background certainly informed this literary vision. Thirteen years earlier, Blatty had graduated from the Catholic Jesuit institution of Georgetown University, where he received his English undergraduate degree. He acknowledged this Ignatian influence on his work, specifically describing *The Exorcist* as a "350-page thank you note to the Jesuits" after he released it in 1971.[2] Fittingly, he sets *The Exorcist* in Washington, DC, and sets several scenes at Georgetown University as a clear nod to his Jesuit alma mater. However, Blatty's most important nod to the Jesuits pervades the literature itself—specifically, Blatty's use of rhetorical and dialectical exchange to comment on theological Catholic realities.

Considering Blatty's education, such exchange can be expected. The Society of Jesus, or Jesuit order, was formed in the sixteenth century during the Renaissance. Like their Renaissance contemporaries, the Jesuits "rebirthed" classical art and philosophy and breathed new life into the humanities. As such, their Catholic perspective was expanded into worldly affairs, not only otherworldly topics. More so than other Catholic orders, Jesuits were concerned not only with theological dialectic but also with how those arguments were rhetorically stylized and delivered.

To this day, Jesuits and professors at Jesuit schools, such as Georgetown University, remain concerned with cross-culture communication and persuasion in relation to social justice issues and inquiry-fueled education[3]—all in

delicate balance with Roman Catholic doctrine. Consequently, both effective communication and philosophical reasoning are valuable equipment to the Jesuits. And this cooperative equipment at work can be understood as rhetorical dialectics. As discussed in chapter 2, rhetoric is the general art of persuading an audience to a message, and dialectic involves the process of truth seeking. Therefore, Blatty—who was educated by Jesuits and contemplated entering the Jesuit priesthood—naturally integrates this interplay of rhetoric and dialectics into *The Exorcist* in a way that was, and still is, attractive to popular audiences. He provides audiences with insight into Roman Catholic belief as well as exemplifying ways in which Catholics communicate belief.

RHETORICAL DIALECTICS

Doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church can be difficult to convey to audiences who are not familiar with the Catholic tradition. As alluded to in previous chapters, Catholicism is not based on blind faith or irrational superstition. Catholic doctrine is composed of complex philosophical arguments that have been updated throughout a long historical tradition. Catholicism requires that faith must be necessarily augmented by reason.[4] The relationship between faith and reason fuels Catholic theology. Volumes of theological texts have been written that unpack the minute intricacies of Catholic theology. Consequently, Catholic theology often cannot be appropriately communicated in simple terms, which can be especially thorny when ushering unfamiliar readers toward sites of understanding. If audiences are not familiar with vocabularies, premises, and attitudes established by previously posited Christian arguments, then communication can fall short.

Ultimately, the rational minutia of Roman Catholic arguments can be communicative obstacles to wider audiences. To sufficiently elucidate Catholic stances, an entire ecology of complex theological arguments often needs to be employed and conveyed. Unsurprisingly, such logically rigid arguments may ignore elements of persuasive style. Consequently, Catholic arguments are not always inclusively stylized for general readerships.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1995) attempts to remedy this often-isolating philosophical discourse. Pope John Paul II declared the creation of this catechism project in 1985; the final project was approved in 1992 and proclaimed as a crucial Catholic text. As a compendium, the catechism offers an organized "source book" that concisely explains all foundational Catholic doctrine and theology. It reinforces the claims through quotations from ecclesial authorities, examples from saints, and enthymematic reasoning. The purpose of the catechism is to help all Catholics referentially—and universally—understand the reasoning of their faith. The catechism is much more

concise and accessible for general audiences; however, like many Catholic theological texts, the catechism is not particularly stylistically appealing. In short, the catechism effectively *tells* audiences about theological arguments but does not *show* audiences theological arguments in action.

So, a challenge is presented. Outside of dense philosophy and catechetical texts, how can Catholic theological content and argumentative processes be effectively stylized for popular audiences without compromising rationality and doctrinal sophistication? How can Catholic doctrinal theology be persuasively communicated to both Catholic audiences and audiences who do not affiliate with Catholicism?

Like *A Mirror of Shalott*, William Blatty's *The Exorcist* acts as Catholic horror literature because its rhetorical mode strongly communicates theological dialectic. To trace this cooperation, the Platonic transcendentals can be consulted—specifically, the intersection of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth. To demonstrate its rhetorical aim in action, *The Exorcist* can model how dialectical argumentation is rhetorically embedded in art—in this case, how it is embedded in contemporary "popular literature"—to heighten the persuasive appeal of Catholic dialectic. As will be shown, three dialectical modes occur in *The Exorcist*: (1) a secular dialectic about the natural world, (2) a secular interrogation about supernatural truth, and (3) a theological dialectic that pursues supernatural truth. The third dialectic discussion, involving Father Damien Karras and possessed Regan MacNeil, provides an ideal mode of Catholic argumentation: one that uses faith and reason, inductive and deductive logic, and science and philosophy. It can be concluded that *The Exorcist* appropriately and inclusively communicates Catholic dialectic without compromising its integral rationality and doctrinal sophistication. Ultimately, *The Exorcist* models a complex interplay between rhetoric and dialectic. It preserves the Platonic spirit of dialectic as "soul leading," persuasively embedding it within Catholic horror literature. Simply put, the novel effectively communicates Catholic reasoning and attitudes to popular audiences. As such, Catholic horror provides a valuable contemplative rhetoric wherein readers (who may or may not be Catholic) can ponder faith, knowledge, and Being itself. To this end, it helps readers recognize the value of theology and consider not only reality's visible but also its invisible dimensions.

ART AND REASON

Popular art provides a persuasive platform to communicate truths to a range of diverse audiences. Art immerses audiences into the message so they can introspectively understand it from inside of aesthetic experience. Narrative art allows gradual understanding by subjectively immersing readers into

both literary "showing" and rhetorical "telling." Rather than a heavy-handed bifurcation of these two dimensions—as is often done in traditional schools of literature[5]—the art of fiction can be understood as rhetorically couching modes of dialectic or "truth seeking."

The relationship between "showing" and "telling" extends back to Plato's *Phaedrus* and *The Republic*: "appearances" (showing) and "truth" (telling). Poetic art, which is associated with Beauty, associates with *mimesis* and the world of appearances; however, the art must correspond and reflect the Forms or the truth in some way (*Phaedrus* 260a–e).[6] Moreover, as decided upon in the *Phaedrus*, the full goal of the art of rhetoric is to "guide the soul" (271b–d).[7] Accordingly, truth associates with the soul—that is, the otherworldly realm of the ideas—something that can be apprehended through philosophical discourse as well as artistic discourse (*Republic* 596e–602).[8] An additional category—goodness—splits from the appearance/truth relationship. Plato's goodness transcends pleasure and is "responsible for knowledge and truth" action (*Republic* 508c–509a).[9] In sum, these three categories are called transcendentals, indicating the transcendental abstract concepts of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth.

In the Catholic tradition—of which Plato is a primary influence—numerous Catholic philosophers, including Thomas Aquinas, Bernard Lonergan, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, polished these concepts in consultation with Aristotle, Augustine, and Christian doctrine; however, the Platonic foundation acts as a philosophical cornerstone of the Catholic transcendentals. Catholic tradition more robustly highlights the unity of the transcendentals. Each dimension points toward Being itself. According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, transcendentals highlight the mystery of Being—that is, the mystery that pervades Being but lies outside of human reach: that which appears and hides simultaneously.[10] The paradoxical relationship keeps contemplatives striving to better understand the mystery despite their human limitations.

Although comprehensive understanding of the truth is out of reach, Catholics use art to better grasp this paradox. However, the cooperation of art and truth can be complex. Although literary art can captivate an audience, it begs the question: how does the writer communicate truths within a narrative while maximizing rhetorical adherence? It seems that rigid argumentation, such as theological or philosophical treatises, would be the most fitting discourse to convey truth. Logic is the rational equipment for proof: theological proof and philosophical proof. Art, on the other hand, seems to be the communicative equipment for relative truths or humanistic subjectivities—a method that counters the construction of universal truths. In other words, artistic representation does not seem to naturally communicate absolutism. Nevertheless, art reveals the pursuit for universal truth in a different way that often logic cannot fully express.

In the *Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth explains that "regardless of how we define art or artistry, the very concept of writing a story seems to have implicit within it the notion of finding techniques of expression that will make the work accessible in the highest possible degree"; doing so requires the writer to embed the subject matter into public communication. Booth states that the writer is "someone who addresses us, who wants to be read, and who does what he can to make himself readable"; and therefore, "the rhetorical dimension of literature is inescapable."[11] According to Booth, it is a misconception that "true artists" write for themselves or for the art itself.[12] It is a misconception that artists do not care about the desires and attitudes of a readership: successful art deliberately communicates to an audience and, consequently, aims for rhetorical ends through aesthetic means.

Catholic writer Flannery O'Connor once claimed, "You say a thing is reasonable and people think you mean it's safe. What's reasonable is seldom safe and always exciting."[13] *The Exorcist* is an example of a rhetorical unfolding of arguments couched within an edgy genre: horror fiction. Therefore, *The Exorcist* models O'Connor's claim: reason is indeed exciting. Moreover, Blatty's novel navigates affective tension, thrill, and anxiety of *theological* reasoning: a high-stakes venture toward *metaphysical* truth. Extending beyond mere reasoning, *The Exorcist* offers a literary example of Catholic horror, a niche synergy that rhetorically captures the tense dialectic of faith and logic.

WORLDLY/OTHERWORLDLY DIALECTICS

The Exorcist tells the story of a twelve-year-old girl, Regan MacNeil, who is inhabited by a demon named Pazuzu. Regan presumably invited Pazuzu into her body while playing with a Ouija board. In the first half of the novel, Regan displays increasing violent signs of her possession—including, unbeknownst to the characters, pushing Burke Dennings, a family friend, from her bedroom window, killing him in the process. After consulting numerous medical experts who perform inconclusive tests on her daughter, Regan's mother, Chris MacNeil, finally recruits a local priest, Damien Karras, who is a Jesuit and psychologist from Georgetown University. After repeatedly speaking to Regan and gathering evidence, Karras determines that Regan is indeed possessed and not merely mentally ill. He invites Father Merrin, a well-known exorcist, to help exorcize and cure Regan. Regan is ultimately saved from the demon through a combination of the exorcism ritual and the loving self-sacrifice of Karras.

Dialectical interaction unfolds at various levels in *The Exorcist*. More pronounced in the novel than the film version, the classical dialectic is on full display in sections of the narrative. Clearly familiar with Plato's dialectical dialogues, Blatty uses dialogical interaction to illustrate characters who pursue both worldly truth and theological truth. The Platonic dialectic occurs in various ways in *The Exorcist*; dialogues involve combinations of resistance and passivity between parties.

Worldly Dialectic

After readers become aware of Regan's possession—or seeming possession—they are guided through a scene wherein Chris MacNeil discovers that her friend and colleague Burke Dennings has died after falling down a steep staircase outside of the MacNeil residence. Detective Kinderman is skeptical about the accidental nature of the fall. He believes foul play is involved. Upon investigating the suspicious occult desecration of a nearby church and then examining the death of Burke Dennings, Kinderman ponders Regan MacNeil's potential involvement with the death.

Before connecting the crime to Regan, Detective Kinderman locates Father Karras at Georgetown University to converse with him about potential information that the priest may have about Dennings's death and the recent church desecrations. Chapter 5 opens with Father Karras running laps at the Georgetown track; Kinderman speaks with Karras after waiting for him to finish his run. Before the conversation unfolds, Blatty describes Karras in a manner that accommodates a worldly gesture to the Platonic transcendentals. In this description, Blatty explicitly points to bodily, appearance-based attributes, underlining the first step on Plato's transcendental ladder: the beautiful. The scene is set outside in the daylight, one of the novel's only scenes to take place outside in the natural world. In addition, the chapter opens with substantial description of that exterior world: "Cupped in the warm, green hollow of the campus, Damien Karras jogged alone around an oval, loamy track in khaki shorts and a cotton T-shirt drenched with the cling of healing sweat. Up ahead, on a hillock, the lime-white dome of the astronomical observatory pulsed with the beat of his stride; behind him, the medical school fell away with churned up shards of earth and care."[14] Blatty opens this chapter emphasizing the natural setting: an approach he seldom implements in other chapters. Moreover, by describing Karras's experience of the world—"clinging sweat," "the astronomical observatory pulsed with the beat of his stride," and "the medical school fell away"—Blatty emphasizes the world of appearances through human perception—that is, the world of appearances as experienced by Karras. In the paragraphs that directly follow, Blatty continues this emphasis on subjective experience as well as the physical body: "Powerful leg

muscles blooded and stinging, rippling with a long and leonine grace, Karras thumped around a turn" and "he slowed to a panting, gulping walk [. . .] both hands pressed light to his throbbing sides. The heave of his rock-muscled chest and shoulders stretched his T-shirt."[15] Out of context, this passage may read as thorough description; however, in contrast to Blatty's non-flowery writing style, the description reads especially deliberate, poetic, and artistic. Blatty underlines the beauty of experience, the world, and the physical body. Additionally, Blatty mentions the "earth" twice in these two passages. Both references involve Karras digging up the earth with his running: Karras and the Earth literally connect. In short, faith and supernatural elements do not have an explicit place in this initial scene. In fact, Blatty explains that Karras came to the track to run ever since he was "relieved of his duties" as a counselor; he currently taught psychology at Georgetown as a lecturer. Apart from his "duties" as a counselor and a priest, Karras is secularized and worldly: merely a man using his body.

Upon meeting Kinderman at the track, Karras insists that they converse while walking, so Karras doesn't cramp after his run.[16] Soon after introducing himself, Kinderman inspects Karras's face, and tells Karras that he looks like Marlon Brando, who also had a scar by his eye. Specifically, Kinderman states:

> "It's true, you *do* look like a boxer. Excuse me; that scar, you know, there by your eye?" He was pointing. "Like Brando, it looks like, in *Waterfront*, just exactly Marlon Brando. They gave him a scar"—he was illustrating, pulling at the corner of his eye—"that made his eye look a little bit closed, just a little, made him look a little dreamy all the time, always sad. Well, that's you," he said pointing. "You're Brando."[17]

Here, Kinderman emphasizes appearances: Karras's uncanny similar appearance to Brando, Brando's closed eye, and the actor's dreamy appearance. In addition, Kinderman highlights the eye specifically—and repeats the word "look" three times. Moving away from the objective exertion of the body, Blatty emphasizes perception: the base level of the transcendentals, one in which the eyes are crucial but can also deceive.

Kinderman's zeal about art, specifically cinema, draws particular attention to beautiful appearances. Kinderman mentions the films *On the Waterfront* and *King Lear* and admits that he "love[s] to talk film; to discuss; to critique."[18] In other words, Kinderman likes to converse about the beauty and the internal order of art. Karras enjoys films as well, but Karras is sure to undercut the reliance on appearances and fiction. He does this via a quip about Kinderman's appearance. Although Karras agrees to see a movie with Kinderman, Karras jokes that Kinderman, a large "wobbling" man, looks like

Paul Newman. Recognizing the sarcasm, Kinderman adds that his beauty (Paul Newman, and he adds Clark Gable as well) is internal, "looking to get out."[19] Within this overall interaction, Karras and Kinderman refer to attractive actors: Brando, Newman, and Gable. Therefore, the men's discussion of appearances is an indirect discussion of beauty. Although Karras and Kinderman understand the appeal of cinematic art, the worldly, and the beautiful, their jokes highlight the deceptive potential of appearances as well.

The characters' banter about resemblances and cinema bookends a more overt truth-seeking dialogue about Burke Dennings's death and recent church desecrations. In the middle of the chapter, Kinderman engages Karras in a dialectical interaction that is significantly longer than its film version. The detective questions Karras about any potential criminals that Karras may have met within the church confessional or otherwise. The banter between Kinderman and Karras quickly volleys back and forth for several pages. The volleying is sustained by Kinderman's incessant questioning, which resembles the Socratic Method found in Plato's dialogues. Blatty's minimalist description and dialogic energy also resembles Plato's literary style. In fact, if readers of *The Exorcist* are familiar with Plato's work, they may find it difficult to miss the stylistic resemblance. Moreover, as already highlighted, Blatty begins and ends the characters' interaction with casual humor and light banter—again much like Plato's interactions between characters. But most important, Kinderman's goal, much like Socrates's goal, is to arrive at a conclusion: the truth—a secular truth about reality—to unveil who desecrated the church and killed Burke Dennings. This dialectical goal mimics the dialectical goal of Plato's dialogues. Like Plato, Kinderman begins with a large question (the cause of Burke Dennings's curious death)[20] but investigates smaller parts of the issue to answer the larger question. The chain of topics sequentially unfolds as follows: (1) recent local church desecrations, (2) witchcraft, (3) the possibility of a psychologically disturbed priest, (4) the ethics of confession, (5) the possibility of a witch coven in the Georgetown area, (6) several globally historical cases of ritual murder, (7) and, finally, a collaborative examination of a piece of evidence from a local desecrated church crime scene.[21] Kinderman hopes to deductively synthesize smaller pieces of information into a conclusion. However, Kinderman does not actually arrive at the truth, or even a conclusion about Burke Dennings's death in this dialogue. Rather, the Kinderman/Karras dialogue utilizes *aporia*; it openly operates with uncertainty, much like Plato's earlier dialogues, such as *Charmides* and *Lysis*. Therefore, although the Kinderman/Karras dialogue may not resemble the conclusive tidiness of Plato's later dialogues such as *Timeaus*, *Phaedrus*, or *Laws*, the dialogue nevertheless gestures to Platonic dialectic philosophy and Socratic dialogic style.

Within this Platonic approach, Blatty illustrates how secular reasoning—reason without faith—insufficiently handles metaphysical issues. After all, Burke Dennings is murdered by spiritual forces—namely, Pazuzu, with Regan as its vessel. Crucial theological lines of inquiry are therefore required to solve the crime. Blatty illustrates the fine line between philosophy and theology, coding the discrepancy in Karras's sarcastic answer when Kinderman asks Karras about his athletic T-shirt with "Philosophers" written on it:

> "Oh, I taught a few courses one year," said Karras, "at Woodstock Seminary in Maryland. I played on a lower-class baseball team. They were called the Philosophers."
>
> "Ah, and the upper-class team?"
>
> "Theologians."
>
> Kinderman smiled and shook his head. "Theologians three, Philosophers two," he mused.
>
> "Philosophers three, Theologians two."
>
> "Of course."
>
> "Of course."[22]

It is difficult to glean much clarity from this interaction. Is theology privileged? Or philosophy? Karras's sarcastic humor mixed with Kinderman's teasing tangential questions obscures any definitive stance. It appears that Blatty is suggesting an interplay here. This quick anecdote spotlights a meta-commentary between theology and philosophy. It remarks upon the interplay between the characters themselves: Karras, Jesuit priest, a professional theologian who studies otherworldly truths; and Kinderman, a professional detective who logically uncovers worldly truths. The dialogical interplay between the two characters represents the cooperation between the fields of theology and philosophy—gesturing to *theological* argumentation, not only philosophical argumentation. In the Kinderman/Karras scene, Blatty depicts the importance and instrumental nature of philosophy in moving beyond worldly appearances; however, he also shows that the truth can still elude philosophical investigation. Theology must be consulted to arrive at the full truth. With such reliance upon theology, which involves more complex dialectical movement toward more metaphysical ends, anxiety and horror increase accordingly.

Worldly/Otherworldly Dialectic

The Platonic-like dialogue between Kinderman and Karras is based on demonstrable reality, material conditions, and material causes; although not successful, it unfolds in an organic manner via the Socratic Method. A

previous, tenser scene in the novel uses a more stifled, unsynchronized dialectical method. Although this dialogue progresses without a theologian, the possessed Regan is present, which elevates the sophistication of the dialectical interaction. Rather than playful speculation about appearances, as seen in the Kinderman/Karras interaction, this dialogue focuses on scientific inquiry about mental states. In this earlier part of the novel, Chris MacNeil puts Regan through several medical tests, and she begins to resort to more alternative forms of science. During one of Regan's numerous examinations, a "noted neuropsychologist" decides to hypnotize Regan to help quell her internal torment and to better understand her apparent split personality.[23] After the hypnotist places Regan under his spell using a swinging watch, he attempts to clarify the reality of Regan's condition. Under the spell, Regan answers his questions without resistance; here she acts as a passive interlocular rather than an active interlocular; Regan resembles Phaedrus in Plato's *Phaedrus*, rather than the more active Polemarchus or Gaucon from Plato's *Republic*. In other words, Regan does not actively participate in the dialogue in the way that Karras had cooperated with Kinderman; instead, under the hypnotist's spell, Regan primarily answers the questions with "I don't know," indicating that she, as Regan, truly does not know what has taken possession of her.

When the hypnotist eventually prompts "the person inside of Regan" to speak,[24] Pazuzu offers more revealing answers, albeit remaining brief. While the demon seemingly tells the truth throughout this tense dialogue, it occasionally codes its responses, playing with the psychologist. For example, when the psychologist asks, "the person inside of Regan" "where do you come from?," Pazuzu answers, "Dog." When the psychologist specifies, "You say that she comes from a dog?" Pazuzu follows with "Dogmorfmocion." The hypnotist does not understand that Pazuzu is speaking in code. Pazuzu is speaking backwards; "Dogmorfmocion" is a mirrored, backward code for "No-I-com(e)-from-God." Pazuzu is essentially telling the truth. The message of the phrase is true—rather the language or rhetoric requires that the truth be decoded.

Why does the demon speak backward? First, the code allows the demon to lie while only hinting at the truth. This deceptive linguistic craftiness opposes Plato's concept of speaking well: communication that is "taken seriously" and (*Phaedrus* 278d) "wherein the real truth lies" (*Phaedrus* 278c).[25] As an immoral entity, the demon uses rhetoric to obscure the truth rather than clarify the truth. But, also, the act of inverting the words mirrors the truth as well. Pazuzu's inverted response that "he comes from God" indicates a paradoxical ontology: the demon is an inversion of goodness whose origin is still God. Pazuzu's linguistic inversion captures the paradoxical nature of the demon's own theological ontology. With a tricky use of language, the demon toys with people to exert power over them: a manipulative use of the rhetorical arts.

The neuropsychologist and the other people in the room miss the inversion signaled by "Dogmorfmocion." This miscommunication spotlights a disconnection between secular scientific rationality on one hand, and theological rationality and faith on the other hand. After all, Pazuzu is referring to theological ontology. This disconnection is more clearly shown in the questions that follow. The psychologist begins to ask questions to Regan and "the person inside of Regan," such as "Are you someone who she's invented?" and "Do you blame her for her parents' divorce?" These questions clearly aim at uncovering a psychological ailment. However, as evidenced by the lack of successful diagnosis, these are the wrong questions to ask.

The psychologist becomes rattled when Regan's confusing answers do not obey the accepted scientific reality. To remedy this confusion, the psychologist invites the "person inside of Regan" (the demon) to reply using head motions—"a nod for 'yes,' a shake for 'no.'"[26] The communication is simple. The demon cannot continue to use coded language. Instead, like Aristotle promotes in the *Topics*, "'Yes' or 'No'" responses are binary and "easily answered," leaving no room for interpretation in responses (158a15–22).[27] Therefore, to maximize scientific objectivity, the psychologist implements this method of questioning. However, the psychologist stops his line of questioning in two places, which reveals his distress—because his quest for objectivity using secular means of inquiry does not work. The neuropsychologist becomes noticeable distressed by the anomalous answers from the "person inside of Regan."

The first time he stops his fast-moving interrogation is when Pazuzu expresses that it wishes Regan dead—and then admits that if Regan dies, it will not die.[28] This response contradicts science. According to scientific principles, if the body dies, then it necessarily follows that the split personality or the entity invading the body must die. However, theological truth transcends the boundaries of scientific commonsense. And the psychologist has not considered these theological dimensions. The psychologist becomes clearly uncomfortable by the demon's inconsistency: "The answer seemed to disquiet him and he lowered his eyes in thought. The bed springs squeaked as he shifted his weight."[29] Here, the scientist is visibly uncomfortable because the subject is not complying with scientific modes of inquiry.

The second moment of the scientist's distress is much more severe. Again, it revolves around scientific inconsistency. The neuropsychologist asks Pazuzu, "Is there something she can do that would make you leave her?" The demon responds, "Yes." He continues, "Can you tell me what it is?" The demon responds, "Yes." Finally, he asks, "Will you tell me?" The demon responds, "No." Confused by the inconsistency, the psychologist manages to object, muttering "But—" However, his plea is interrupted when Regan (as Pazuzu) grips and squeezes his scrotum "like an iron talon."[30] Through

violent means, Blatty reveals a disconnection between the material reality that the psychologist strives to understand and the theological reality that Pazuzu does not want the scientist to understand. Pazuzu successfully follows through the disconnection: he forcefully ends the conversation.

Upon closer examination, this dialogical disconnection demarcates what the demon "can" do within Regan's body from what the demon "wills" to do. In other words, the ability to potentially do something in the material world is quite different from the will or motivation to actually do the action. The former, "what a being *can* do," is neutral and scientifically verifiable based on certitude of a creature's potentiality. A scientist can gather data and assert with certainty that a being possesses the ability to do something. The latter, "what a being *wills* to do," is based on probable attitude, which assumes that observable behavior predicts future patterns of behavior. The neuropsychologist's inquiry suffocates under scientism. He fails to recognize the theological layer of data—one that lies outside measurable reality. Pazuzu is not a psychological disorder; rather, Pazuzu is a demonic entity *who is disorder itself*: a lack of love and the will for chaos. In other words, Pazuzu's essence should be examined, not merely its material existence. Mocking the impotent method of scientific data gathering, Pazuzu finally provides the neuropsychologist with empirical evidence that reveals his demonic will: physical harm inflicted on the doctor. Pazuzu's mockery of the psychologist's investigation implies that the demon would be more compliant in another format of dialogue—namely, one using more sophisticated, open, and deductive reasoning, the equipment of religion and Christian philosophy.[31] A system of logical inquiry that adequately handles *essences*, not merely *existences*.

This scene primarily displays Pazuzu's disordered conduct or actions toward other people. Pazuzu's skewed morality, in other words, is displayed in this scene. For example, Pazuzu tells lies as ends in themselves, not as means to some other ends. Moreover, Pazuzu also causes physical harm to others. Regan is not merely disordered in isolation (e.g., urinating on the carpet during the party,[32] convulsing on the bed[33]) as illustrated by previous scenes; instead, this scene shows how Pazuzu physically affects other human beings. It highlights how a disordered essence can affect material reality. This collision between essence and existence provides a platform for theological interrogation. However, the secular characters do not make this connection. The scene's witnesses only recognize Regan's worldly disorder; accordingly, they apply scientific equipment to the dilemma. If the witnesses evaluated Regan's behavior through the lens of a theological ethical standard (dis/ordered essence), rather than a secular ethical standard (dis/ordered existence), then their "theo-logic" could uncover crucial metaphysical insights, insights that deductively point to Regan-as-Pazuzu as the murderer of Burke Dennings. Theological ethics—much like Platonic morality—straddles the

metaphysical world and the physical world. Theological ethics are informed by the ultimate Good of Christian life, yet they are applied in the practical world of appearances.[34] This scene orchestrates a more robust gesture toward the metaphysical—and consequently, a more robust gesture to a theological mode of assessment, one that requires the cooperation of faith and logic to understand the interrelationship between metaphysical essence and applied actions. In short, this scene provides an intermediary scene between the worldly dialectic of the Kinderman/Karras scene, and the spiritual combat that unfolds later in the novel. By displaying the insufficiency of secular reasoning and Pazuzu's moral privation, the dialectical scene establishes the exigency by which theological reasoning and the expertise of the Roman Catholic Church must be applied.

Otherworldly Dialectic

The third dialectic interaction successfully navigates essence and existence; and it occurs long after the hypnotist episode. It involves two characters: Pazuzu, who remains housed in the body of Regan, and Father Karras. Through this set of interactions between the priest and the demon, Blatty portrays how theological inquiry can work; therefore, he portrays how religious—specifically Roman Catholic—dialectic can productively unfold. Readers of *The Exorcist* may consider Father Merrin's exorcism rites to be the height of the novel's significance; however, it is in fact the dialectical exchanges between Father Karras and the possessed Regan that compose the crux of the novel. They display Flannery O'Connor's claim that reason can be "exciting."

Despite the novel's title, *The Exorcist* primarily revolves around Father Damien Karras, not the exorcist (Father Merrin) or even the exorcized (Regan MacNeil). Karras is a psychologist and a Jesuit priest. He balances both science and religion (or attempts to balance both). Karras allows each discipline to inform the other. Whereas the hypnotist neuropsychologist represents hard science, Karras equally represents soft science and religion. Each of Karras's fields requires the cooperation between faith and reason. Religious thinking often consults deductive reasoning—the logical arrangement of general claims (the universal to a singular, or the least to less universal)—while science often depends upon inductive reasoning—experimentation and data collection (the singular to the universal).[35] Appropriately, Karras illustrates both religious modes of reasoning and scientific modes of reasoning. Unlike the neuropsychologist who is suffocated by science, Karras is open to investigative possibilities, stating that "there's little in this world that I know for a fact."[36] Accordingly, in his dialectic interactions with the demon, Karras openly examines whether Regan is authentically possessed by a demon or

merely psychologically disturbed. In his investigation, Karras works *via negativa*, or by way of the negative. Often used in theology, this approach logically determines what *is* by determining what it *is not*. Therefore, by showing that Regan has knowledge and abilities that she cannot possibly possess, Karras can logically determine that she is possessed by a demon or a devil.

Karras is presented with the question of the demon's identity: Is Regan possessed by her subjective "demons," or is she possessed by an objectively invasive supernatural demon? This primary research question informs Karras's line of inquiry. He uses the Socratic Method to arrive at information—and then logically arranges that information to arrive at new conclusions. This approach is shown at the beginning of his first dialogue with Regan. The Socratic logic can be distilled from the interaction:

> "Who are you?"
> "I'm the devil. . . . Now kindly undo these straps."
> "You say that you are the devil?"
> "I assure you."
> "Then why don't you just make the straps disappear?"
> "That's much too vulgar display of power, Karras. Too crude. After all, I'm a prince! [. . .] Moreover, if I loosen the straps myself, my friend, I deny you the opportunity of performing a charitable act."
> "But a charitable act," said Karras, "is a virtue and that's what the devil would want to prevent; so in fact I'd be *helping* you now if I *didn't* undo the straps. Unless, of course"—he shrugged—"you're really not the devil. And in that case, perhaps I *would* undo the straps."[37]

Karras bases his argument on two general truth claims about the nature of the devil: (1) the devil is powerful enough to alter the physical universe, potentially making objects disappear, and (2) the devil wants to prevent virtue in all cases. He links these claims to an underlying assumption about the nature of virtue and charity.

After this exchange, the demon changes the subject; Karras's logical objection is left without a reply. Predictably, Pazuzu proclaims that the priest should have "faith" that Pazuzu is the devil and that Karras should not require evidence. Karras is not persuaded by Pazuzu's advocacy for *sola fides*. Here, Karras shifts. Within this second part of the first dialogue, he engages in more inductive means of argumentation, proof, and evidence. Rather than arranging general claims to formulate new claims, Karras moves from specific evidence to general claims. In other words, Karras stops depending fully on deductive philosophy and begins relying on inductive scientific method. Karras attempts to "test the extent" of Regan-Pazuzu's knowledge. Specifically, Karras tries to catch a disparity between a twelve-year-old's knowledge and the knowledge from an ancient demon. A clear gulf between the two types

of knowledge would evidence that a supernatural being inhabited the child's body. To test this hypothesis, Karras asks the demon questions to test the range of its knowledge. After receiving some knowledgeable answers, Karras is still not fully convinced. After all, Regan could have read and retained such information from books. Due to this possibility, Karras admits that his data is unreliable and cannot be fully relied upon to justify an exorcism.

In Karras's most scientific moment in the novel, he performs a physical experiment. He throws "ordinary tap water"[38] onto Regan and claims that it is holy water. Pazuzu famously screams, "It burns!"[39] thus implying that Regan is faking the possession. The underlying assumption is that the demon would only be pained by blessed water. However, this does not acknowledge that Pazuzu's "it burns" verbalizes a subjective state; the demon could be lying about the burning sensation, and Karras would never know. Since Pazuzu admits that "the devil likes liars"[40] and "I *do* like to playact,"[41] it is possible that the demon is lying when the tap water is sprinkled on Regan as a means to deceive Karras. But Karras and readers never know. The unclear results from the tap water experiment may corroborate Father Merrin's statement later in the novel that "The demon is a liar. He will lie to confuse us; but he will also mix lies with the truth to attack us. The attack is psychological [. . .] and powerful."[42] Blatty places the reader in this ambiguous space—the dangers of misusing the dialectic-rhetoric interplay—so that audiences can experience Pazuzu's deceptive (un)dialectical rhetoric.

(UN)DIALECTICAL RHETORIC

Karras privileges the truth over persuasion—something that Regan-Pazuzu mocks him for in his second dialogue with the demon: "How novel to attack through the truth! Ah, what joy!"[43] Conversely, Pazuzu defends itself with persuasion rather than truth, explicitly remarking, "I much rather prefer persuasion, Karras!" during their first interaction.[44] The interaction displays opposite ends of the Platonic spectrum: Regan-Pazuzu's sophistic rhetoric (that is, rhetoric without absolute truth) on one end—and Father Karras's dialectical truth (that is, truth seeking without relying only on rhetorical appeal) on the other end. Each party uses their preferred means to engage their opponent. Karras ultimately wins the battle through his favored logical means. Karras arrives at the truth that Regan is possessed. And this diagnosis allows Father Merrin to exorcize Regan in part 4 of the novel.

Pazuzu uses several persuasive strategies that interrupt Karras's truth-seeking endeavor. In fact, Pazuzu's un-dialectical strategies try to pull Karras away from truth seeking. For example, Pazuzu repeatedly evokes emotion in Karras to manipulate him. The demon makes claims about Karras's

mother to get him upset: "Your mother is in here with us, Karras. Do you wish to leave a message? I will see that she gets it."[45] It vulgarly references pedophilia to rattle the priest's sensibilities, "Do you want to fuck her [Regan]? Loose the straps and I will let you at it!"[46] The demon uses knowledgeable puns about historical figures such as Herod[47] to display its knowledge and appeal to *ethos*. Pazuzu also varies its languages; it speaks in Greek, French, German, Latin, and English during an interaction with Karras.[48] Furthermore, the delivery of these languages varies; the demon toggles between its "low-pitched voice,"[49] Brooklyn accent, and British accent. Moreover, the stylistics are wielded more persuasively. Chris MacNeil observes this stylistic alteration of Regan's speech patterns, stating that Regan does not sound like a twelve-year-old girl; her daughter's "style" has changed, specifically "the way she puts words together."[50] Pazuzu's strategies are rhetorically charged. The demon manipulates rhetorical strategies to move its audience away from the truth, rather than toward the truth. It uses language to disorder, rather than to order, and aligns with a Catholic theology of evil.

INVERTING THE TRANSCENDENTALS

The Exorcist can be seen as introducing a scientifically updated Platonic dialectic to late twentieth-century audiences in a rhetorical manner. Blatty couches dialectical exchange toward Roman Catholic truth via an accepted vehicle of popular culture: popular literary art. However, why does Blatty choose the horror narrative as the means to convey Roman Catholic dialectical exchange? Why not drama? Why not fantasy? After all, Catholic writers such as Graham Greene or J. R. R. Tolkien offer accessible conversations about Catholic transcendentals via dramatic and fantasy literary genres. Moreover, in the synoptic Gospels, Jesus interacts with the devil in the desert without the scene escalating into horror. So, how—and why—does Blatty rhetorically use the horror genre to couch dialectical interactions between characters?

Blatty's rhetorical use of the horror genre spotlights evil as the inversion of Catholic transcendentals. When approaching the horror genre, audiences maintain a particular fortified threshold of expectations. Audiences understand and accept that horror films generally include elements such as violence, ugliness, anxiety, dread, death, disorder, and/or corruption. These traits can be incarnated in forms such as masked killers, monsters, or supernatural agents. Regardless of the approach, the horror genre features heavy-handed negativity—and therefore, audiences expect negativity to pervade the story. Blatty dwells in this genre because it is an accepted and free artistic space to illustrate an undistilled Catholic version of sin and evil. Blatty's representation of

sin as evil is doctrinal. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, sin is "an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure of genuine love for God and neighbor (505); sin is evil, specifically doing "which is evil in your [God's] sight" (Psalm 51:4).[51] Therefore, through the vessel of Regan, Pazuzu incarnates Catholic concepts of sin and evil.

More specifically, Pazuzu—within the vessel of Regan—inverts the three aforementioned Platonic transcendentals. First, through her initial innocence, Regan embodies beauty and goodness. Conversely, Pazuzu changes Regan into an overtly ugly character. Upon meeting the possessed Regan, Karras observes that her face was "shaped into a skeletal, hideous mask of mind-bending malevolence," where "yellowish saliva dribbled down from a corner of her mouth to her chin"; she has "scratch marks on her face" and "cuts on her lips where apparently she had bitten them"; moreover, her hair was "matted" and her arms and legs were "wasted," and her "distended stomach" was "jutting up so grotesquely."[52] Regan is no longer the girl with a "soft shining face"[53] and "smooth" cheeks.[54] Her physical beauty is corrupted by evil and becomes transformed into its opposite: ugliness. Therefore, the initial transcendental, Beauty, becomes inverted.

Although restricted to the confines of the bedroom, possessed Regan still manages to sin quite often: she masturbates in public,[55] masturbates with the crucifix,[56] mocks the Catholic faith,[57] inflicts physical violence on her mother,[58] and murders Burke Dennings by pushing him from her second-story window. Blatty clearly shows that Pazuzu has no "genuine love for God and neighbor." Therefore, possessed Regan acts as a doctrinal representation of sin, inverting the transcendental of Goodness.

Finally, as previously shown in the analysis of the dialectical interactions with Karras, Pazuzu often, if not always, lies. Lying is the absence of truth; therefore, the possessed Regan represents an absence of truth specifically through a manipulative craft of rhetoric. As formerly mentioned, Pazuzu's backward speech signifies an inversion of truth. Later in the novel when Karras interrogates Regan in her bedroom, the possessed Regan whispers, "nowonmai,"[59] an inversion of "I am No One." The content of the statement reveals two kinds of untruth: the manipulated grammar (viz. statement is backward; "one/won" is misused), and the untrue statement itself (viz. the demon has an identity; the demon is not "No One"). Consequently, Pazuzu's rhetoric becomes a funhouse mirror of sorts, distorting the transcendental of Truth.

When the exorcism and Karras's Christ-like sacrifice successfully returns order to the MacNeil household, transcendental Beauty, Goodness, and Truth return to their proper arrangement;[60] moreover, Karras becomes a martyr, entering heaven via peaceful, albeit emotional "last rites" given by his friend

Father Dyer.[61] Overall, Blatty has shown the importance of Catholic transcendental concepts by immersing audiences in demonic scenarios where Beauty, Goodness, and Truth are absent—that is, these dimensions transform into ugliness, immorality, and untruth. The audience then grasps the urgent importance of transcendental unity found in God and, by extension, the Roman Catholic Church. Blatty artistically uses the dialectic thesis-antithesis contrast to usher readers to a site of religious understanding.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

For the dialectic to genuinely oscillate between theses and antitheses in *The Exorcist*, Blatty requires genuine antitheses. The contrast must be explicit. Horror provides an arena of acceptable explicit contrast that can accommodate supernatural conflict. If the conflict is clearly established, why not then orchestrate a hero-priest versus devil conflict in a typical religious horror story fashion—as seen in Jay Anson's 1977 novel *The Amityville Horror* or its cinematic derivatives? Or why not tell the typical "good versus evil"/"conflict with monster; hero conquers monster" horror narrative? Why pivot a horror narrative upon dialectical argumentation sequences instead of more basic storytelling?

The literary inversion of the Platonic transcendentals crucially comprises the theoretical foundation of Catholic horror literature of which *The Exorcist* is an exemplary model. If Blatty had not fronted and exacerbated the horrific dimensions of his Catholic story, the novel's theological severity and the spiritual urgency would have been diminished. In short, Blatty's inversion of the transcendental trivium within a genre that can house such an inversion—that is, the horror genre—spotlights the operations of a dialectical truth seeking that fuels Catholic theology.

Why use a literary rhetoric of horror specifically to represent Catholic truth seeking? Philosopher Noël Carroll defines what he labels "art horror" in *Philosophy of Horror*. In it, he describes art horror as a narrative that threatens normalcy, involving a monster who represents a breach of impurity. Specifying, Carroll defines a monster as "any being not believed to exist now according to contemporary science,"[62] and he defines impurity as "formless or incompleteness . . . categorical contradictoriness."[63] How does this work with Catholicism? Catholics believe in the literal existence of demonic monsters; however, as shown throughout Karras's struggle to gather scientific evidence throughout *The Exorcist*, contemporary science does not confirm the demon's existence; rather, a demon's existence is confirmed via dialectical disputation in *The Exorcist*. The secular materialistic science cannot reveal the nature of the monster, so theology—what medieval thinkers hailed as "Queen of the

Sciences" and its according dialectical machinery—must be consulted as an elevated mode of knowledge and understanding. Since Catholicism depends on faith and philosophical logic operating alongside "contemporary science," Carroll's definition of horror is immediately complicated. In respect to the second part of Carroll's definition, Pazuzu does not merely enact "impurity" by inverting or contradicting the Catholic transcendentals of Beauty, Goodness, and Truth as a means to make them "incomplete"; rather, the demon's essence is the inversion and incompleteness itself. As an incarnation of vice and lies, Pazuzu represents the Catholic theology of evil, which acts as the ultimate monster, striving to undo the order of Being that God loves into existence. Therefore, *The Exorcist* complicates Carroll's definition and offers a unique type of horror since it explores the meaning of evil rather than merely the existence of evil. Accordingly, it evidences how Catholic horror literature can be more rhetorically complex than typical popular horror fiction.

Depicting literary representations of doctrinally real "monsters," Catholic horror literature offers a forum to engage the properties of Catholic transcendentals. In his *Theo-logic*, Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar explains that the transcendentals "can be grasped only in and through one another" and "in their communion, they furnish proof of the inexhaustible depth and overflowing richness of being."[64] Subsequently, within any literary representation, the illustration of the interconnectedness of the transcendentals can assist readers' theological and spiritual understandings. Balthasar continues to explain that transcendental properties reveal that "in the end everything is comprehensible and unveiled only because it is grounded in an ultimate mystery, whose mysteriousness rests, not upon a lack of clarity, but rather upon a superabundance of light."[65] Paradoxically, Christians are urged to understand truth as mystery. Yet despite human limitations, they continue to strive to better understand that mystery. Consequently, *The Exorcist* provides readers a forum to shade carefully and temporarily the "superabundance of light" and peer into the mystery. Readers can use the equipment of reason and imagination to witness and engage with "darker" transcendental inverses. Therefore, horror, rhetoric, and dialectic can cooperate to communicate the "incomprehensible" nature of being in a distinctively Catholic manner—but since the incomprehensible nature of being is not exclusive to Catholicism, it also communicates theological dimensions that are shared by other denominations, faith traditions, and spiritualities.

Balthasar asks, "What is more incomprehensible than the fact that the core of being consists in love and that its emergence as essence and existence has no ground other than groundless grace?"[66] By grappling with the comprehension of the incomprehensible within narratives like *The Exorcist*, readers can better understand Catholic truths about faith, love, and "groundless

grace"—the essence, mystery, and the healthy anxiety[67] associated with these pivotal Christian concepts. Through rhetoric-dialectic interplay, Catholic horror can provide an arena for readers to contemplate faith, logic, and the nature of Being itself—so they can ultimately reap theological and spiritual fruits.

NOTES

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41. Blatty, *The Exorcist*, 265.
42. Blatty, *The Exorcist*, 337.
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45. Blatty, *The Exorcist*, 233.
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59. Blatty, *The Exorcist*, 269.
60. Blatty, *The Exorcist*, 379–85.
61. Blatty, *The Exorcist*, 374–75.
62. Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror; or, Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 27.
63. Carroll, *Philosophy of Horror*, 32.
64. Balthasar, *Theo-logic*, 225.

65. Balthasar, *Theo-logic*, 225.

66. Balthasar, *Theo-logic*, 225.

67. For more on sin-anxiety and grace-anxiety, see Hans Urs von Balthasar's *The Christian and Anxiety* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1994; originally published in 1989).

Conclusion

Orienting the Head and Heart

All four works of Catholic horror literature discussed in this book express supernatural realism. And many of the aforementioned theorists gesture to it as well: from Plato to Mortimer Adler, from Kenneth Burke to Hans Urs von Balthasar. Despite fictional representations, Catholic horror expresses spiritual combat as real combat. Through conventions of the genre, Catholic horror writers express a reality of evil as a serious threat. Modern audiences, though, may misunderstand or ignore such supernatural realism—and the according representations of evil. For example, after publishing *The Exorcist*, William Peter Blatty received letters from Catholics and Christians who criticized *The Exorcist* for the novel's graphic scenes. Blatty responded to conservative criticism of *The Exorcist* by appealing to realism—and ultimately the intersection of rhetoric and literature. In his response to critics, Blatty explained that

> the descriptions of demonic behavior are authentic (as are also the descriptions of rites at Black Mass; and everything else in the book that relates to satanism or possession). Furthermore, and purely apart from dramatic considerations—the need for something so unthinkably horrible . . . that it drives an atheist to a priest—if you're attempting to present possession as possible evidence of an unutterably evil and malevolent intelligence, then you must back it up both in concrete detail and in the viscera. You cannot say, 'Regan then did something awful'; for if demons exist, that is not the way to argue it; and not the way to make us abhor something evil.[1]

To revisit the analogy from Flannery O'Connor, Blatty "makes his vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing he shouts, and for the almost-blind he draws large and startling figures" in *The Exorcist*.[2] But Blatty does not only grab the attention of audiences through "startling figures" but also appeals to the historical phenomena of Black Mass and documented cases of demonic possession. *The Exorcist* was inspired and based on a St. Louis exorcism case documented by the *Washington Post* in 1949.[3] Similar to J.

K. Huysmans, Blatty thoroughly researched his subject matter. He studied possession phenomena, corresponded with exorcists, conversed with university professors, and spoke with witnesses of possession cases.[4] Blatty maintained that Regan MacNeil's possession had to be based on reality; he became genuinely convinced that demonic possession was real. Without a conviction about this reality, he was certain that he would not want to write the novel and that the storytelling would suffer.[5] After all, as Blatty insists: "A hollow heart cannot excite."[6] As a man who became convinced of demonic possession after meticulous research, Blatty passionately wrote the novel—and it was a success. Blatty excites his audiences by representing a reality that is both startling and uncomfortable. As such, it is difficult to ignore.

Clearly, *Là-Bas*, the second half of *The Light Invisible*, and various stories from *A Mirror of Shalott*, offer an approach similar to that of *The Exorcist*. As older texts, they are naturally less graphic due to the conventions of the time periods. And yet, Robert H. Benson and Huysmans similarly appeal to realism. They caution against inversions/privations of the Good, True, and Beautiful—that is, the temptations of sin, deception, and destruction—which remain realistic dangers within the Catholic faith. Catholics may find it unsettling to think about these threats and temptations—but since horror literature offers a comfortable arena to feel discomfort, it should not be much of a surprise that Catholicism can rhetorically purpose these darker illustrations. For example, after the release of *The Exorcist*, Blatty received a perplexing critique of the novel from Raymond Schroth, SJ, in *Commonweal Magazine*.[7] The Jesuit priest did not criticize the novel's obscenity but, instead, criticized how the novel fostered superstitious belief in Satan, prompting a return to "pre-Enlightenment" diabolical possession.[8] Blatty was baffled by Schroth's comment because Catholic doctrine about Satan has remained generally the same since the Middle Ages.[9] After all, the Roman Catholic Church never stopped believing in the devil; rather, post-Christian culture stopped believing in the devil.

Through their literary rhetorics, Blatty, Benson, and Huysmans communicate the belief that external reality (*Logos*) extends beyond human beings; as such, it is clouded by *agnosis*, which obscures full knowability. As a main thrust of these novels, this agonistic perspective opposes a prevalent modern attitude asserted by Ludwig Feuerbach in his 1841 book, *The Essence of Christianity*, which influenced various atheistic philosophers—including, most notably, Karl Marx—and which still informs schools of secularization.[10] In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach asserts, "God is the manifested inward nature, the expressed self of a man" because "[t]he consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge. By his God thou knowest the man, and by the man his God; the two are identical."[11] Ultimately, by equating God with human consciousness, Feuerbach

does not entertain God as other than human. To this end, he undercuts the role of Catholic theology, classical philosophy, and classical dialectics. Catholic horror fiction essentially counters Feuerbach in its messaging. Challenging the premise that humans invented God, Catholic horror communicates the often-difficult pursuit of the objective presence of God in opposition to the subjective comforts of a self-invented god.

Therefore, as shown in the previous analyses, two key features operate within Catholic horror: (1) the realism of the *Logos* that extends beyond human power (and, conversely, the anti-*Logos* as a privation) and (2) the narrative use of dialectics to better understand and communicate *Logos* and the human role within the Theo-drama. Ultimately, the quest to understand such vastness can be exhilarating and terrifying—so naturally, the horror genre becomes a fitting place to explore this wonder and communicate it to a range of audiences.

APORIA AND DOUBLE IGNORANCE

As shown throughout this book, Catholic horror fiction celebrates *agnosis*; and conversely, it recognizes how overconfidence in *gnosis* can obstruct philosophical and theological inquiry. Through rhetorical dialectics, Catholic horror literature can move readers into agnostic positions of wonder, allowing readers to begin to understand what they do not fully understand. A similar recognition of ignorance is often implemented by Socrates throughout Plato's dialectical dialogues. By dwelling in these spaces of ignorance, readers are guided toward what Ward Farnsworth calls, "aporetic cleansing."[12] *Aporia*, the root of "aporetic," acts as the crucial moment before actual learning can occur.[13] When confronting *aporia*, readers are drawn into humility as they recognize the false assumption that the ideas and terms they relied on are no longer obvious or efficacious.[14] *Aporia* humbles readers into understanding the incompleteness of their existing knowledge.[15] As a method, it motivates them to create space for more holistic truth. This act can clear away past presuppositions, and it serves as a form of cleansing, one that makes way for learning.

As Farnsworth points out, *aporia* can be fragile, and therefore, some readers can overlook or dismiss their encounter with *aporia*.[16] Ideally, however, thinkers dwell with a text's *aporia*; they persevere through it, learn from it, and reap its educational benefits.[17] Horror literature provides that persuasive and delightful aporic vehicle for readers to spend time and learn from their encounter with the fiction. After all, *aporia* can naturally result from unknown or supernatural elements found in horror narratives; supernatural

horror is therefore a fitting genre to house *aporia* so that readers can develop humble attitudes toward knowledge.

Much like Socrates's dialectical method in Plato's dialogues, *aporia* can awaken participants to their own ignorance.[18] As such, it combats double ignorance. This type of awakening can be uncomfortable, much like the affect stirred in horror storytelling itself. Therefore, the dialectics of horror fiction can harmonize such aporic awakening with the expected affect of horror. Due to audiences' expectations of the genre, dialectical discomfort is not a surprising experience. Rhetorically speaking, horror fiction constructs the appropriate fictional occasion to deliver *aporia*. Because they recognize the genre's conventions, audiences can be more prepared for the emergent discomfort; they are also more receptive to dwelling within the discomfort and learning from it.

Too much self-love can interfere with such instructive discomfort. According to Plato's *Laws*, excessive love of self is "the cause of all sins in every case" because it causes a person to become "blind"; it makes the lover of self "a bad judge of things just and good and noble" because they value themselves "more than what is true" (731e–732a).[19] Catholic horror fiction helps escort readers away from such selfishness so that they can direct their attention outward to love of others and God. Due to its imaginative allowances, the fiction transports readers into a more enchanted world of supernatural forces and mysteries. Dialectics transport readers away from double ignorance toward exogenic truths. To gesture to twentieth-century Platonist moral philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch, literature can help "unself" readers or "to clear . . . minds of selfish care."[20] She maintains that art assists in this process by delivering individuals toward that outwardness and immersing them in it. And this outward-facing direction fosters love of others. After all, others are part of reality, and thinking outside of ourselves involves contemplating reality itself. Murdoch clarifies that love is "the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real."[21] So ultimately, love, art, and morals are all grounded in the discovery of reality,[22] an act that enables individuals to "pierce the veil of selfish consciousness and join the world as it really is."[23] As contemplative fiction, Catholic horror literature is an art form that cultivates these outward-facing attitudes about reality and love.

Catholic horror is one variety of optimistic contemplative horror that emphasizes the reality of the *Logos*; it tempers self-invention by taking reality seriously, an arena that includes supernatural reality. However, this contemplative emphasis does not neglect the role of subjectivity. American Trappist monk Thomas Merton defines contemplation as a practice that channels subjectivity in a specific way. Contemplation, he says, is

> the experiential grasp of reality as *subjective*, not so much "mine" (which would signify "belonging to the external self") but "myself" in existential mystery. Contemplation does not arrive at reality after a process of deduction, but by an intuitive awakening in which our free and personal reality becomes fully alive to its own existential depths, which open out into the mystery of God.[24]

He explains that Descartes's *cogito ergo sum* opposes the contemplative mode.[25] This is the case because the act of contemplation ponders Being itself, and all individuals have a place within the realm of Being. A contemplative ponders the external world through such introspection. Accordingly, the reach toward objectivity resembles Murdoch's notion of the loving act of unselfing. In many ways, this process/act refers to a universal concept found inside and outside of Catholicism. It is therefore an approach that can resonate with audiences who may not be Christian or affiliated with any religious tradition. After all, Murdoch was an atheist (with reverence for Anglicanism), and Merton was a known champion of interfaith dialogue. As open-minded thinkers, they both implicitly oppose Feuerbach's overly zealous humanism. Both thinkers support the premodern attitude of the "porous self," an attitude that is central not only to the Catholic intellectual tradition but also to Catholic horror literature.

MENTAL MODELS

In this conclusion, I will revisit the concept of the "porous self," the term coined by Charles Taylor as discussed in the introduction. The works of Catholic horror discussed in the previous chapters all privilege the premodern porous self over "buffered self" of the modern day. In privileging this earlier mode of subjectivity, the horror texts affirm that the porous self offers a "higher condition" external to the self, one found in an enchanted understanding of the cosmos. But as Taylor points out, this condition is not found "out there" or "in here"; rather, it is found in the "interspace" between these two realms.[26] He writes, "emotions which are in the very depths of human life exist in a space which takes us beyond ourselves, which is porous to some outside power."[27] To the extent that meaning is not created individualistically or externally detached, the interspace requires social interaction. Taylor recognizes that by living in an enchanted world, premodern people lived socially,[28] and social lifestyles required social communication. The social communication that explores the interspace between external truths and individual subjectivities must ultimately rely on dialectical strategies—that is, the cooperative competition of opposites.

Appropriately, Catholic discourse, including Catholic horror fiction, utilizes dialectics to navigate the enchanted world and nourish porous attitudes. Ultimately, Catholic horror literature provides an immersive "mental model" that familiarizes audiences with porousness. It provides an arena allowing audiences to recalibrate and move beyond the modern limitations of Feuerbachian self-invention. And certainly, Catholic discourse is not alone in this approach. Other religions and spiritual traditions such as Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism also provide mental models that accommodate supernatural realities and facilitate porous dispositions.[29]

Mental models are inclusively practical. As a mental model featured in Catholic horror literature, the Catholic dialectic can help people see the world through a different lens, one where the *vita contemplativa* informs the *vita activa*. As such, Catholic horror can have practical value for a range of readers outside of the Catholic faith. According to Shane Parrish, the founder of Farnam Street and an influential thought leader for entrepreneurs, mental models describe how the world works by shaping how people think, how they understand, and how they form belief through a lens of representation.[30] He explains that human beings utilize a host of these models to think, decide, and function in the world. Accordingly, he maintains that multiple mental models

> improve your understanding of the world we live in and improve your ability to look at a situation through different lenses, each of which reveals a different layer. They can be used in a wide variety of situations and are essential to making rational decisions, even when there is no clear path. Collectively they will allow you to walk around any problem in a three-dimensional way.[31]

Academic fields can corroborate Parrish's practical sentiment. They similarly find mental models valuable in learning and discovery. For example, cognitive scientists have shown that mental models are useful in at least three ways: (1) to help learners envision complex structures or systems, (2) to facilitate understanding through analogies that connect an unknown domain with a more familiar one, and (3) to simulate processes of a system as thought experiments to gauge possibilities and probabilities.[32]

Ultimately, mental models help thinkers explore new ways of understanding the world, providing them with more decision-making options. They allow thinkers to move outside of their comfort zone, which can be limited by professional overspecialization or disciplinary blindness. Therefore, advocates of mental models like Parrish argue that thinkers should absorb these effective models as a means of navigating reality thoughtfully without surrendering to relativism.

As shown in the literature analyzed in this book, dialectics are modeled in Catholic horror fiction. Therefore, these texts are united by a rhetorical

mission that aims to instruct and habituate readers to such a mental model of understanding reality. After all, dialectics are crucial to thinking philosophically and thinking theologically in a *fides et ratio* tradition. In a way, the horror storytelling acts as a secondary rhetorical vehicle, working to instruct readers about this mental model and mode of thinking. In this way, the architecture of thinking becomes the message. The literature frames a particular orientation by engaging the imagination.

A didactic reading of Platonic dialogues can apply to Catholic horror fiction, especially to the four works analyzed in this book. As noted by Farnsworth, the Socratic Method within Plato's dialogues can be seen as examples of how to think about anything.[33] This very model of thought can be a primary takeaway when reading Plato's work. In a way, the dialogues' topics can be seen as Hitchcockian "MacGuffins": they are significant to the literary movement of the work, but the topics are not essential to the mission of the text.[34] Thus, readers do not have to engage only with the topics of Plato's dialogues; rather, they can read Plato to familiarize themselves with dialectical patterns of reasoning.[35] Catholic horror fiction can operate in a similar manner. Regardless of a reader's religious orientation or familiarity with theology, these texts offer broader patterns of dialectical reasoning. While this approach is a distinct part of the Catholic intellectual tradition, it enables diverse audiences to unpack lofty ideas, consider transcendent topics, and pursue truth.

COURAGE AND OPTIMISM

As shown in the works of Huysmans, Benson, and Blatty, Catholic horror literature works as rhetoric cooperating with dialectic to help readers move toward contemplating the grander reality of things—both visible and invisible. As pointed out in the earlier chapters, this wider perspective differs from the anthropological or cultural vantages as seen in modern social horror narratives and some secular horror frameworks. Instead, Catholic horror literature communicates a philosophical and theological understanding of reality in a frightening, albeit optimistic, manner—one that avoids naivety but also inspires courage.

Therefore, Catholic horror fiction counters physicist Stephen Hawking's claim about the futility of religion. Hawking suggested that heaven and the afterlife—and by association, religion more generally—are a fairy tale for those who are "afraid of the dark."[36] As gestured to in chapter 1, Catholicism is not afraid of the dark. In fact, unlike some Christian denominations, Catholicism deliberately reaches out to illustrate uncomfortable aspects of reality to better understand the supernatural elements that are relevant

to human life. Moreover, as Benson's *A Mirror of Shalott* highlights with particular clarity, faith seeks understanding. Christ's death on the cross, for example, offers a sorrowful and gory image to be sure. But it is also a paradoxically joyful image that provokes the faculty of reason in believers, who seek to understand the significance of this event. Similarly, the lives of Catholic martyrs often involve depictions of gore that evoke sorrow, for the realities of human mortality are painful and involve suffering. And yet these stories also inspire both hope and intellectual activity as believers seek to better understand how such hagiographic tales connect death to the promise of the afterlife.

In short, Catholicism dialectically explores both the bright and dark aspects of reality. An exemplary model of this dialectic is shown in the systematic philosophy/theological work of St. Thomas Aquinas. As a Doctor of the Catholic Church and a highly regarded (and often cited) Scholastic theologian from the Middle Ages, Aquinas wrote an abundant amount of philosophy. Within his work, he famously answered *quaestio disputata* (disputed questions) by providing his own reasoned arguments to questions, but only after he addressed objections to his theses.[37] In much of his thinking, he transparently replies to objections and counterarguments. In line with the thinkers who influenced him, including Plato, Augustine, and Aristotle, Aquinas embraced a dialectical format of *disputatio* evident in the hundreds of disputed questions that he answered throughout his *Summa Theologica*.[38]

Aquinas's summa *disputatio* resembles two similar dialectical mechanisms at work within the Catholic horror literature analyzed in this study. First, in all four texts, a back-and-forth movement unfolds not only between human characters who voice differing positions but also on a grander scale between the metaphysical and physical worlds. In *Là-Bas*, dialectical interactions take place between Durtal and Des Hermies and Carhaix. In *A Mirror of Shalott*, these interactions unfold between the differing degrees of skeptical priests. And in *The Exorcist*, dialectical dialogue emerges most prominently in the conversation between Karras and Pazuzu. As early medieval philosopher Anselm of Canterbury notes in chapter 1 of *On Free Will*, entrapment between the "yes" and "no" is a very human position.[39] Catholic horror illustrates this human dialectical struggle within the text itself in its ongoing pursuit of the consummate "yes." Accordingly, it pulls audiences into this perpetual struggle by enabling readers to identify with conflicted characters of the novels who are trapped between the "yes" and the "no."

Second, Catholic horror fiction utilizes the *via negativa* approach in a grander manner much like Aquinas does. In Aquinas's hundreds of disputed questions, he seldom addresses the resplendent nature of God directly. Respectful of the limits of human rationality, Aquinas's approach often looks

to clarify what God is not to better understand what God is.[40] In this "way of the negative" method, Aquinas is also concerned with understanding sin (the absence of goodness) to better understand goodness.[41] Catholic horror fiction draws on this medieval philosophical approach and uses storytelling to convey the value of the *via negativa* to readers in the present era. Catholic horror storytelling resembles Aquinas's work in that it shows readers what God is not and what goodness is not; the stories work dialectically to clarify that the *via negativa* is not the end. Catholic horror literature gestures to "no" primarily to communicate the "yes"—that is, the presence of God, Being, and the transcendentals of Goodness, Truth, and Beauty.

John Lennox, an Oxford mathematician and theologian,[42] counters Hawking's claim that heaven is a fairy tale for those who are afraid of the dark. Lennox suggests that "atheism is a fairytale for those afraid of the light."[43] Catholic horror fiction uniquely addresses both Hawking's and Lennox's claims, and at the same time, it alleviates both types of fears. Specifically, Catholic horror fiction can effectively communicate the reality of evil to spiritual and religious readers who are not afraid of the dark; but it also effectively communicates supernatural realism to atheists and agnostics who are not afraid of the light. In the spirit of rhetorical dialectics, Catholic horror literature collides both perspectives to open up readers to wider and understandings of reality and truth; it also models a courageous way of considering reality and truth through philosophical and theological methods. Ultimately, Catholic horror literature facilitates a dialectic between Hawking's perspective and Lennox's perspective, and it functions rhetorically to place readers at the center of this inquiry.

In a way, the potential skepticism and agnosticism of audiences are reactions/sensibilities that sit at the heart of Catholic horror literature. In *Pensées*, Enlightenment-era Catholic philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal observes that people of his time "despise religion" because they are "afraid that it might be true."[44] Since these people resist religion, he proposes that religious communicators must proceed patiently and lead skeptics through three stages to move them toward religious understanding. First, communicators should appeal to both the heart and intellect of their listeners and surprise them by showing that "religion is not contrary to reason."[45] Second, communicators should then seek to move the will of their audience by showing that religion is "worthy of veneration and should be given respect."[46] Third, they should make religion "lovable, so that good men will hope it is true."[47] After these three stages, audiences will ideally find themselves more receptive to the final stage, which entails formal evidence and rational argumentation.

In a unique way, the rhetorical dialectics of Catholic horror addresses Pascal's first three stages of religious communication. If orchestrated well, as shown in the work of Huysmans, Benson, and Blatty, Catholic horror

storytelling balances the head with the heart. The dialectics of Catholic horror literature speaks to the head via intellectual reasonableness while the rhetoric of fiction speaks to the heart via the imagination and the feelings it evokes. In contrast to forms of cultural production that only offer disturbing representations of evil, Catholic horror engages the darkness and the negative way to communicate a sense of respite found in the Good, True, and Beautiful. This approach helps kindle "respect" for Catholicism as an intellectual and spiritual tradition, fostering desire among "good men" to "hope it is true," much like Pascal encourages.

The imaginative experience available through literature provides an arena that allows readers to encounter a Catholic philosophical orientation (in relation to counter-orientations) and better understand supernatural realism. And it offers a safe forum for engaging audiences in this enterprise. After all, readers can entertain such an orientation—that is, they can wear the clothing or put on the mask—without necessarily committing to it. Much like Benson's narrator at the end of *The Light Invisible* or Blatty's Chris MacNeil at the end of *The Exorcist*, readers will not likely be inclined to immediately convert to Catholicism after reading Catholic horror fiction. Nor is the conversion of its readership a central aim of such literature. However, Catholic horror texts can shape the cognitive habits of audiences, helping them become more receptive to dialectical thinking and its distinctive use of formal theses, reasoning, and evidence. As Pascal observes, effective religious communication can open people's minds and hearts toward sophisticated religious arguments. For this reason, such communication can play an active role in today's pluralistic post-Christian landscape. Catholic horror literature serves this purpose as a body of writing that offers a fundamentally hopeful rhetoric. Its dialectical methods have the unique capacity to open potentially resistant minds both to wider cosmological possibilities and to broader understandings of reason and faith.

NOTES

1. William Peter Blatty, *If There Were Demons Then Perhaps There Were Angels* (New York: TOR, 1998), 40.
2. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 34.
3. Blatty, *If There Were Demons*, 4.
4. Blatty, *If There Were Demons*, 13–26.
5. Blatty, *If There Were Demons*, 20.
6. Blatty, *If There Were Demons*, 20.

7. Raymond A. Schroth, "Exorcising the Exorcist," *Commonweal Magazine*, November 1972.

8. Blatty, *If There Were Demons*, 41; Schroth, "Exorcising the Exorcist," 110.

9. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), 110–11.

10. Jaco Beyers, "Feuerbach, Religion and Post-theism," *Theological Studies* 78, no. 2 (August 2022): a7781, https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i2.7781.

11. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1989; originally published in 1841), 12–13.

12. Ward Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method: A Practitioner's Handbook* (Boston, MA: Godine, 2021), 169.

13. Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method*, 169.

14. Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method*, 169.

15. Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method*, 169.

16. Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method*, 176.

17. Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method*, 176.

18. Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method*, 168–69.

19. Plato, *Laws*, trans. Robert Gregg Bury (London: Heinemann, 1967), 339.

20. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1970), 82.

21. Iris Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," in *Existentialists and Mystics*, 205–20 (New York: Penguin, 1998), 215.

22. Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," 215.

23. Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 91.

24. Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1972; originally published in 1961), 8–9.

25. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 8.

26. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 36.

27. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 36.

28. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 42.

29. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 67.

30. Shane Parrish and Rhiannon Beaubien, *The Great Mental Models*, vol. 1, *General Thinking Concepts* (Ottawa: Latticework, 2019), Kindle.

31. Parrish and Beaubien, "Introduction: Acquiring Wisdom," in *The Great Mental Models*, Kindle Edition, 122.

32. Norbert M. Seel, "Mental Models in Learning Situations," in *Mental Models and the Mind*, ed. Carsten Held, Markus Knauff, and Gottfried Vosgerau (Amsterdam: North Holland, 2006), 87–88.

33. Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method*, 102.

34. Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method*, 102.

35. Farnsworth, *The Socratic Method*, 102.

36. Ian Sample, "Stephen Hawking: 'There Is No Heaven; It's a Fairy Story,'" *Guardian*, May 11, 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2011/may/15/stephen-hawking-interview-there-is-no-heaven.

37. The summa genre was not exclusive to Aquinas. The approach was typical within the work of other Scholastics of the Middle Ages, such as Thomas Chabham

(Thomas of Salisbury) and Roger Bacon, who also made it their mission to logically wrestle with profound philosophical and theological questions in holistic manners. For more on this subject matter, see James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

38. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica: Complete English Edition in Five Volumes*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948).

39. Robert Barron, *Thomas Aquinas: Spiritual Master* (Park Ridge, IL: Word on Fire, 2022), 34; Anselm, *On Free Will*, trans. Ralph McInerny, in *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*, eds. Brian Davies and G. R Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 176–77.

40. Barron, *Thomas Aquinas*, 37.

41. Barron, *Thomas Aquinas*, 36.

42. Lennox was an opponent of the New Atheists from the 2000s/2010s, which included Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett.

43. Gary Vacek, "Lennox Brings Faith-Sharing to Chapel," *Grand Canyon University News*, February 23, 2016, https://news.gcu.edu/gcu-news/lennox-brings-faith-sharing-formula-to-chapel/.

44. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12.

45. Pascal, *Pensées*, 12.

46. Pascal, *Pensées*, 12.

47. Pascal, *Pensées*, 12.

Appendix

Catholic Horror Authors and Authors Who Inform the Study of Catholic Horror Literature

This comprehensive list was compiled in collaboration with John J. Jasso, PhD.

Allegri, Dante (1265–1321)

Roman Catholic poet, philosopher, and political thinker, Dante Allegri wrote *The Divine Comedy* of which *The Inferno* was a part and features elements of horror storytelling. *The Divine Comedy*, as a whole, exhibits rhetorical dialectics—especially since it was written in the vernacular to connect with wider audiences. *The Inferno* may be considered one of the earliest examples of Catholic rhetorical dialectics at work within horror narrative.

Benson, A. C. (1862–1925)

He was Robert Hugh Benson's oldest brother. Although not a Catholic writer, he wrote ghost stories with Christian perspectives in mind. For example, in his nonfiction book on the horror genre, *Where No Fear Was*, he explains how horror tales can cultivate the role of courage and resilience. Relevant texts: *Where No Fear Was: A Book about Fear* (1914) and "The Closed Window" (1903).

Benson, Monsignor Robert Hugh (1871–1914)

Benson wrote ghost stories as well as historical fiction, science fiction, and apologetical works. Although his father was the archbishop of Canterbury, he converted from Anglicanism to Catholicism. Monsignor Benson was known

for his "triumphalism" approach to Catholicism—which, despite his literary popularity, may bristle some audiences. For more on Benson, see chapters 4 and 5. Relevant texts: *The Light Invisible* (1903), *A Mirror of Shalott* (1907), and *The Necromancers* (1909).

Benson, E. F. (1867–1940)

The most successful ghost story writer of the three Benson brothers, E. F. Benson was not Catholic. Although his tales do not feature much religiosity, he integrated some interesting metaphysical perspectives into his ghost stories.

Bernanos, Georges (1888–1948)

Most well known for his novel *The Diary of the Country Priest* (1936), Bernanos was a Catholic writer who communicated supernatural—and sometimes violent—struggles between good and evil in his novels. His novels regularly feature priest characters. Relevant texts: *Under the Sun of Satan* (1926).

Blatty, William Peter (1928–2017)

Beginning as an American screenplay writer of comedies, Blatty became a Catholic horror writer by writing the best-selling novel *The Exorcist* in 1971. William Friedkin's award-winning 1973 film adaption was overseen by Blatty. Blatty wrote a sequel to *The Exorcist* in 1983 titled *Legion*. *Legion* is the basis of the 1990 film *Exorcist III*. For more on Blatty and *The Exorcist*, see chapter 6.

Boucher, Anthony (1911–1968)

An American Catholic, Boucher was an award-winning science fiction and mystery writer. He also helped found the *Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. He wrote some supernatural detective tales. Relevant texts: "The Compleat Werewolf" (1942) and "They Bite" (1943).

Brownson, Orestes Augustus (1803–1876)

An American labor activist, intellectual, and Catholic convert, Brownson wrote political/religious/philosophical works throughout the 1800s. In 1854, he wrote *The Spirit Rapper: An Autobiography* (later retitled *Like a Roaring Lion*), which is considered a fictional autobiography. In it, Brownson

illustrates popular practices of spiritualism and occultism and evaluates them as evil practices; consequently, the book exhibits some dimensions of supernatural horror storytelling.

Chesterton, G. K. (1874–1936)

An Englishman and Catholic convert, Chesterton was an influential fantasy writer, theological thinker, and literary critic. Although he was not particularly fond of ghost stories, his 1908 novel *The Man Who Was Thursday* offers some elements of horror storytelling. His essay "Red Angel" (1909) provides interesting perspectives into dark storytelling as well.

Connolly, John (1968–)

An Irish Catholic writer of crime/thriller fiction, Connolly infuses supernatural horror elements into his work. He is best known for his Charles Parker series and the young-adult Samuel Johnson series.

Del Toro, Guillermo (1964–)

A Mexican filmmaker, del Toro was raised Catholic but has since lapsed. Del Toro notes that, despite not being a Catholic believer, Catholicism still influences his work. He has cowritten several horror novels with Chuck Hogan, including the Strain series.

Gaiman, Neil (1960–)

Not a Catholic, Gaiman is a best-selling and award-winning British writer of sci-fi and dark fantasy literature. He often integrates classical virtues and themes into his fiction. He is influenced by the Catholic writers G. K. Chesterton, Gene Wolfe, and R. A. Lafferty. As a young writer, Gaiman corresponded with R. A. Lafferty. Relevant texts: *Coraline* (2002) and the Sandman series.

Greene, Graham (1904–1991)

An English writer of literary fiction, Greene was a Catholic convert. He is often most known for literary novels such as *The End of an Affair* (1951) and *The Power and the Glory* (1940). However, various short stories he wrote can be considered horror, such as "A Little Place of the Edgeware Road" (1939), "Proof Positive" (1930), and "The Second Death" (1929).

Hodgson, William Hope (1877–1918)

Not a Catholic, Hodgson was an English horror/fantasy writer and renowned bodybuilder. His father was an Anglican clergyman, which helps explain Hodgson's interest in mystical/cosmic horror. Relevant texts: *The House on the Borderland* (1908) and *The Night Land* (1912).

Huysmans, J. K. (1848–1907)

A French naturalist decadent writer, Huysmans aligned with Émile Zola for much of his early writing career until he became more mystically minded and eventually converted to Catholicism. He is known more for his literary fiction than horror fiction. For more on Huysmans, see chapter 3. Relevant texts: *Là-Bas* (1891) and *En Route* (1895).

James, M. R. (1862–1936)

English writer M. R. James was an important figure in the proliferation of popular ghost stories. Although James was not Catholic, he knew the Benson family and visited them. Some of his stories offer Catholic themes or references, such as his 1895 short story "Canon Alberic's Scrap-Book."

King, Stephen (1947–)

This best-selling American horror writer is not Catholic; however, his wife was raised Catholic. Also, he consulted a Catholic priest when developing the character of Father Callahan in '*Salem's Lot* (1975). King expresses some frustration with Catholicism in *Danse Macabre* (1981) when discussing Ira Levin's 1967 *Rosemary's Baby* and William Peter Blatty's work. Relevant texts: "One for the Road" and "Jerusalem's Lot" (both found in 1978's *Night Shift*), '*Salem's Lot*, and *Danse Macabre* (nonfiction).

Kirk, Russell (1918–1994)

Kirk was an American political thinker and literary critic. Kirk is most known for his 1953 nonfiction book *The Conservative Mind*, which influenced twentieth-century American traditional conservativism. He converted to Catholicism in 1963 and wrote various ghost stories thereafter. His ghost stories often feature Catholic references and perspectives. Relevant texts: "Saviourgate" (1976) and "Watchers of the Strait Gate" (1980).

Koontz, Dean (1945–)

This American best-selling horror writer still actively publishes horror, suspense thrillers, and science fiction. Koontz converted to Catholicism in college. Relevant texts: the Odd Thomas series and "Twilight of the Dawn" (1987).

Lafferty, R. A. (1914–2002)

A prolific American Catholic writer of science fiction, horror, and speculative fiction, Lafferty was known for his tight journalistic style, wit, and outlandish stories. His work was influenced by G. K. Chesterton. His work influenced Neil Gaiman. Relevant texts: *Fourth Mansions* (1969), *Strange Doings* (short story collection, 1972), *Nine Hundred Grandmothers* (short story collection, 1970), and *It's Down the Slippery Cellar Stairs* (essay collection, 1979).

Levin, Ira (1929–2007)

Levin was not a Catholic, but his popular 1967 horror/suspense novel *Rosemary's Baby* (turned into a film in 1968, directed by Roman Polanski) follows the Catholic character of Rosemary who is manipulated by a Satanic cult. Levin later regretted that *Rosemary's Baby* fostered popular belief in Satan.

Lewis, C. S. (1898–1963)

Lewis was an influential Christian thinker and fantasy writer. An Anglican and member of the Inklings, he is most known for his Chronicles of Narnia children's book series. Although he did not typically write horror, he penned "The Shoddy Lands" (1956) and *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), which can both be considered works of horror.

Lord Dunsany (1878–1957)

Anglo-Irish writer Lord Dunsany (or Edward Plunkett) was the eighteenth baron of Dunsany. He extensively wrote fantasy stories. However, his *The Gods of Pegana* (1905) features creation mythology and cosmic horror and influenced H. P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu mythos. Although he was not Catholic, his family line has shifted into Catholicism over time.

MacDonald, George (1824–1905)

This Scottish Congregational minister wrote fantasy literature for adults and children. He was highly influential in the development of fantasy literature. Some of his work offers horror dimensions and rhetorical dialectics. Relevant texts: "Uncle Cornelius, His Story," "The Cruel Painter," and "The Gray Wolf" (found in the posthumous 1924 short story collection titled *The Portent and Other Stories*) and *Lilith* (1895).

Machen, Arthur (1863–1947)

This Welsh horror/fantasy writer's real name was Arthur Llewellyn Jones. He was fascinated with the occult and metaphysics. As an Anglican who descended from a line of clergymen, Machen was deeply spiritual and appreciated Catholic mysticism. His work has been praised by various horror authors, including H. P. Lovecraft, Peter Straub, and Stephen King. Relevant text: *The Great God Pan* (1894).

Matheson, Richard (1926–2013)

An American writer of horror and science fiction, Matheson was raised as a Christian Scientist. Christian themes surface in some of his fiction, including *What Dreams May Come* (1978) and his 1954 short story "The Traveler."

O'Connor, Flannery (1925–1964)

As an American Catholic writer from the South, O'Connor is often considered to be the master of Catholic dark fiction. She is known for crafting discomforting characters and circumstances into many of her stories. Relevant texts: "The Enduring Chill" (1958), "The Lame Shall Enter First" (1965), and "The Crop" (1971).

Perrotta, Tom (1961–)

This American author was raised Catholic. Perrotta's dark eschatological 2011 novel *The Leftovers* offers representations of spirituality and religion.

Poe, Edgar Allan (1809–1849)

Although Poe was not Catholic, he was fascinated by Catholicism. His works' transcendent themes and dialectical structures can inform the rhetorical machinery of Catholic horror fiction. Relevant texts: "The Imp of the

Perverse" (1845), "William Wilson" (1839), and "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839).

Powers, Tim (1952–)

An American writer of fantasy, science fiction, and horror, Powers is a practicing Catholic. He is known for using "secret histories" and time travel in his storytelling. Powers was mentored by renowned science fiction writer Phillip K. Dick. He has twice won the World Fantasy Award. Relevant texts: *Down and Out in Purgatory* (short story collection, 2016), *Declare* (2000), and *The Stress of Her Regard* (1989).

Rice, Anne (1941–2021)

Rice was an American novelist known for her best-selling Vampire Lastat book series. After spending much of her life as an atheist, she returned to the Catholic Church in the late 1990s and wrote more clearly Christian-themed books. She noted that theologians Karl Rahner and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin strongly influenced her writing. She distanced herself from Christianity at the end of her life. Relevant texts: *Memnoch the Devil* (1995) and *Called Out of Darkness: A Spiritual Confession* (2008).

Saberhagen, Fred (1930–2007)

A practicing Catholic throughout his life, Saberhagen is best known for his science fiction and fantasy, specifically the Berserker and Empire of the East series. However, he wrote the Dracula series, which reimagines Bram Stoker's character of Dracula. This series of ten books and two short stories extended from 1975 to 2002.

Spark, Muriel (1918–2006)

A British literary novelist, Spark converted to Catholicism in 1954. She implemented wit, satire, and disturbing characters in her work. Later in life, she composed several nonfiction books on literary figures. Muriel Spark published ghost stories throughout her career in venues such as the *New Yorker* and *London Mystery Magazine*.

Stoker, Bram (1847–1912)

As a Protestant, Stoker illustrated Christian perspectives through his Anglican character of Jonathan Harker within his most famous novel *Dracula* (1897).

The European villagers who interact with Harker in his travels to Count Dracula's castle are Catholic. The novel's Abraham Van Helsing also offers a Catholic representation.

Summers, Montague (1880–1948)

This controversial English writer/historian converted from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism. Although Summers claimed that he was ordained as a Catholic priest, it is speculated that he merely pretended to be a priest without being ordained. He is most known for his nonfiction books on the occult (including werewolves and vampires)—and his unwavering belief in the supernatural and the dangers of modern witchcraft. It is noted that Summers read J. K. Huysmans's *Là-Bas* and R. H. Benson's ghost stories. Summers also wrote his own ghost stories. For more on Summers's mysterious life, see Bernard Doherty's "From Decadent Diabolist to Roman Catholic Demonologist: Some Biographical Curiosities from Montague Summers' Black Folio," in *Literature & Aesthetics* 30, no. 2 (2020). Relevant texts: *Six Ghost Stories* (1938, not published until October 2019) and *The Bride of Christ and Other Fictions* (posthumous, 2019).

Wharton, Edith (1862–1937)

As a Pulitzer Prize–winning author, Wharton is best known for her literary fiction, specifically, *The Age of Innocence* (1920) and *Ethan Frome* (1911). She wrote a number of ghost stories and became more sympathetic to Roman Catholicism toward the end of her life. She died without converting to Catholicism. Relevant text: *Ghosts* (personally compiled from tales written between 1902 and 1937).

Williams, Charles (1886–1945)

A member of the Inklings, Williams was an Anglican writer with interest in the occult. His novels often explore deeply philosophical themes, such as *The Place of the Lion* (1931), a dark fantasy novel where Plato's Forms come to life and invade a British town. The novel gestures to the Catholic mysticism of Dionysius the Areopagite. *War in Heaven* is another notable Willams novel with Catholic protagonists.

Wilson, F. Paul (1946–)

This American horror and thriller writer was raised Catholic but lapsed and distanced himself from religion. Wilson is most well known for his

1983 novel *The Keep* and his ongoing Handyman Jack book series. Catholic characters and references appear in his novels—most notably in the 1990 novel *Midnight Mass*.

Wolfe, Gene (1931–2019)

An influential American Catholic writer, Wolfe penned dark fantasy and science fiction works. Winner of two Nebula Awards, he was inducted into the Science Fiction Hall of Fame. He repeatedly praised the work of R. A. Lafferty. Relevant texts: "The Tree Is My Hat" (1999), "Game in the Pope's Head" (1988), and "The Detective of Dreams" (1980).

Zelazny, Roger (1937–1995)

A celebrated American science fiction writer who won several Hugo and Nebula awards, Zelazny was raised Catholic but lapsed. Although not often known for horror literature, he wrote *A Night in the Lonesome October* (1993) as his last novel. The playful Lovecraftian novel includes various literary horror figures, including a Victor Frankenstein character, a Dracula character, and a Rasputin character.

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